

Universität Erfurt

Dissertation

# **The Other Within and the Self Without: Encounters of Muslim and Western Traditions in the Study of Religion**

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Muhammad Akram

Dekan: Prof. Dr. Guido Löhner

Gutachter/in: 1. Prof. Dr. Jamal Malik

2. Prof. Dr. Jörg Rüpke

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## ABSTRACT

This study is an investigation into the mutual perceptions of Muslim and western learned traditions in the study of religion. The dissertation is divided into three parts corresponding to its three central research questions. These questions are as follows. Firstly, does the emergence and development of the study of religion in both knowledge traditions relate to encounter with religious or cultural otherness, and if yes, how? Secondly, how the disciplinary self-perceptions bear on the western perceptions of the Muslim study of religions on the one hand and the Muslim views of the western religious studies on the other? Lastly, what sort of reflexivity, reciprocity, and mutuality has emerged, if any, as the result of encounters of the two knowledge traditions, especially after the mid-twentieth century?

Theoretically, the study draws on ‘symbolic interactionism’ ascribed to George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) for interpretation of the self-other dialectics. Occasionally, the study refers to the distinction of ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ standpoints that the American linguist and anthropologist Kenneth L. Pike (1912-2000) introduced with reference to understanding of human behaviour in cross-cultural settings. The terms imply understanding of cultural system from within and without, respectively. Symbolic interactionism and the notion of etic and emic standpoints are used mainly for synchronic analysis. The idea of ‘invention of traditions’ propounded by the British sociologist Eric Hobsbawm is employed to take account of the Muslim tradition of study of religions in its diachronic dimension and to analyse how Muslim intellectuals identify themselves with the Muslim legacy of the study of religion (*al-milal wa al-niḥal*) on the one hand and how they respond to the modern approaches in religious studies on the other.

The disciplinary identity of the contemporary Western religious studies is seen as an outcome of the broader conditions of modernity and the engagement of Western thinkers with religious otherness. With scholars like Hans G. Kippenberg, it is maintained that religious studies underscored an ambivalent relationship between scientific progress and the pervasiveness of religion, accepting the existential importance of religion but rejecting its claim to ultimate truth. On the other hand, the emergence and development of *al-milal wa al-niḥal* legacy is viewed both with reference to the Qur’ānic worldview and as an outcome of the encounters with other religious traditions which the Muslim civilization went through in its history. It is argued that the Qur’ānic view of religions combines the elements of negation and affirmation with regard to other religions, especially Christianity and Judaism. The

resultant ambivalence towards other religions generates and sustains the interest in different religions and at the same time makes their objectification possible. Thus, certain Muslim scholars such as al-Bīrūnī (362/973–443/1048) and al-Shahrastānī (479/1086–553/1153) found an epistemological framework through which they could approach the plurality of religions rationally and present it descriptively. Such Muslim scholars employed the hermeneutical tools and historiography which had already developed in the Muslim intellectual history when various branches of knowledge emerged and culminated into a variety of distinct disciplines.

In the second part, Western perceptions of the Muslim study of religions are classified into three broader types, that are, reception of the classical Muslim texts on religions in the course of the movement of editing oriental manuscripts. The media of these perceptions has been introduction, prefaces, and forewords to the edited manuscripts as well as marginal notes. The next phase witnessed detailed studies of individual Muslim writers on other religions. More recently, a variety of systematic and interpretive studies have appeared that venture to make an overall assessment of the Muslim study of religions. It is noticed that in general the Anglo-American scholars show comparatively greater willingness to accept the alternative scholarly models for the study of religions as credible. The continental European scholars tend to cherish the spirit of scientific inquiry reminiscent of the foundations of disciplinary landscape that emerged during the Enlightenment.

On the other side, contemporary Muslim approaches and responses to religious studies, too, are divided into three categories. The first approach can be seen as the ‘(re)invention of tradition’ as selective elements of the past *al-milal wa al-niḥal* scholarship are used to conceptualize the Muslim religious studies. Some other Muslim scholars have taken adoptive stance towards religious studies as they discuss the situation and prospects of this discipline in Muslim countries. Finally, there are a few Muslim intellectuals who have critiqued religious studies at a variety of theoretical levels. It is noted that although this group of scholars criticises the discipline of religious studies from quite different theoretical positions, they share the concern that it is deeply embedded in secularism. Moreover, it is noticed that in all instances of the second-order Muslim reflections on the study of religion the “West” stands for the Other, which sometimes proves to be catalyst in creative developments, while in the instance of excessive othering leads to regression of the creative intellectual activity.

In the third and last part it has been noted that the contemporary encounters between Muslim and Western knowledge traditions have been instrumental in developing some instances of reflexivity, reciprocity, and mutuality with regard to the discipline of religious studies. Generally, Noticeable arenas of reflexivity, reciprocity, and mutuality include - in the order of magnitude of the development- the theory and method debate, media of scholarship, institutional contexts, and formulation of categories. It is noted that scholars like Basit Bilal Koshul, Arvind Sharma, and Brodeur are trying to develop models of mutually shared intellectual spaces which can be seen as embodiment of the ideal: *The Other within and the Self without*.

Finally, it is concluded that analogously to the identity of social agents, the disciplinary identity of religious studies emerges over against the perceived Other. However, the sheer necessity of other for acquisition of self identity generates ambivalence towards the Other. Such ambivalence lies at the heart of second-order mutual perceptions of Muslim and Western traditions in the study of religion.

## Preface

Religious studies is usually considered a modern discipline which emerged as an outcome of the broader cultural experience of Western civilization since the Enlightenment movement onwards. The present dissertation, however, is based on the understanding that if identity of this discipline is not construed narrowly, its certain traits had already appeared in the Muslim cultural history between ninth to twelfth centuries. Now, as the pressing phenomenon of globalization has created a situation today in which no cultural entity can exist in complete isolation from rest of the world, religious studies is compelled to broaden its disciplinary boundaries. In response to this process of broadening, the cultures at receiving end assert their demand for recognition and participation. This in turn requires revisitation of the theoretical foundations of the whole enterprise of the study of religion and renegotiation of its disciplinary identities. Within the context of such cross-cultural concerns, the present study discusses the mutual perceptions of Muslim and Western traditions in the study of religion which emerge as they come into contact with each other, especially after the mid-twentieth century.

Apparently, the pole terms 'religious studies' and 'the Muslim study of other religions' are too general to be credibly compared. There is no denying that such broad and theoretically conceived expressions tend to homogenise the complexities and round the important details and differences of historical realities. The alternative is no less problematic, nonetheless. Very precise and narrowly focussed case studies, for instance comparison of two authors or institutions, have their own pitfalls. In order to draw certain conclusions from such focussed case studies, one would need to extend the import of the results to other similar cases. That is generalization again. Distorting as generalization may be but it is unavoidable, at least to a certain degree. In the final analysis, it is a choice between 'generalization-before' and 'generalization-after'. Keeping in view this dilemma, the present study strives to make it through with this problem by combining together both general and specialized levels.

The book is divided into three parts excluding the introductory chapter. The first part interprets the emergence of the study of religion in Muslim and Western cultures with reference to encounters with the perceived Other and in relation to other closely related branches of knowledge. The second part takes stock of those works which interpret or evaluate the respective Other's scholarship, that is, Western scholars' critique of the Muslim study of other religions on the one hand and the Muslim scholars' evaluation of the

contemporary Western religious studies on the other. According to the knowledge of the present scribe this type of second-order studies are not exceedingly numerous. Therefore, this part gives a general idea of the ongoing debate on the topic in question and then focuses on work of some selected authors. Those authors have been selected for discussion whose contribution in the study of other religions is comparatively significant and who have the greater exposure to the other scholarly tradition. Another major consideration has been linguistic and regional representation. Thus, the first part counts for a generalized level of study while the second part is a specialized one. The third part, in turn, discusses the reflexivity and mutuality between the two knowledge traditions in question as a result of their encounter.

The focus of study regarding time span is from the mid-twentieth century to date. This specification is based on the consideration that the two traditions of the study of religion(s) became aware of each other's existence largely after the mid-twenties. However, this focus excludes the first part as it deals with the earlier stages of academic study of religion in both the traditions. The dialectics of Self and Other operative at the genesis stages is seen extended to second-order mutual perceptions discussed in the second part. Therefore, the first part is not simply a background study rather it makes up the argument developed in the thesis.

The study has limitations in terms of sources. It draws on the Arabic, Urdu, English, and German sources. Any conclusion drawn in this study, therefore, should be considered a partial view as it remains blind to sources in Turkish, Malay and other languages of the Muslim world as well as important European languages like French, Italian, and Spanish.

Some practicalities need to be clarified here. *Chicago 15A* manual of style is used for footnote citations and bibliographical records. References to the Qur'an appear in the text according to this pattern (Q, chapter number: verse number). Transliteration table for Arabic and Urdu words is given below, which is more or less the system used by the Library of Congress. However, where a bibliographical source already carries transliterated words the original source is not altered to standardize it according to the scheme adopted here. Thus, the proper name Muḥammad may also appears as Mohamed and Mohammad depending on the original source. At first occurrence of non-English words or expressions in the text, their nearest English equivalent is supplied in parenthesis. Also the titles of bibliographical sources in oriental languages are translated into English. The years of birth and death of deceased Muslim scholars are supplied according to both Islamic (Hijrī) and the Common Era

calendars (example: ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (479/1086–553/1153). In rest of the cases only Common Era years are given. In case the year of birth is unknown or disputed the information is reduced to the year of death only.

At the end, I want to express my thankfulness for all those who have been encouraging and helpful to me one way or the other in carrying out this research project. First of all, my profound thanks go to Prof. Dr. Jamal Malik whom I always found very encouraging and generous as my supervisor. What is even more important is the fact that he extended to me maximum freedom of thought without failing to guide on technicalities of the scientific research. I am thankful to him also for his kind hospitality during my stay in Erfurt. Prof. Dr. Görg Rüpke, too, deserves my sincere thanks. He has been the second supervisor of this thesis and whenever I needed his guidance I found him available and encouraging in spite of his diverse academic and administrative responsibilities during these years. I am extremely indebted to Prof. Dr. Christoph Bultmann for his exceptional hospitality, help, and support in matters academic as well as personal throughout my stay in Germany. Indeed, words fail me in expressing my heartfelt thanks to him. My thanks go also to Prof. Dr. Hans G. Kippenberg who gave valuable suggestions after going through my initial research proposal. Needless to say, none of the above mentioned scholars is responsible for the views expressed in this dissertation or for its possible shortcomings.

Finally, I am indebted to the following institutions for their support. The University of Erfurt partially funded my stay in Erfurt, while the Higher Education Commission, Pakistan, sanctioned living allowance for one year. The International Islamic University Islamabad granted me study leave for three years to pursue my doctoral studies.

# Transliteration Table

ا	a	د	<u>d</u>	غ	gh	بھ	<u>bh</u>	Long Vowels	
ب	b	ذ	dh	ف	f	پھ	<u>ph</u>		
پ	p	ر	r	ق	q	تھ	<u>th</u>	آ	ā
ت	t	ڑ	r̥	ک	k	ٹھ	<u>ṭh</u>	ی	ī
ٹ	ṭ	ز	z	گ	g	جھ	<u>jh</u>	و	ū
ث	th	ژ	z̄	ل	l	چھ	<u>ch</u>	و (Urdu)	ō
ج	j	س	s	م	m	دھ	<u>dh</u>	ے (Urdu)	ē
چ	ch	ش	sh	ن	n	ڈھ	<u>ḍh</u>	Short Vowels	
ح	h	ص	s̄	و	ṇ	ڑھ	<u>r̄h</u>		
خ	kh	ط	t̄	ہ	h	کھ	<u>kh</u>	ا	a
د	d	ظ	z̄	ی	y	گھ	<u>gh</u>	ی	i
								و	u



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## **Chapter 1:**

### **1. Introduction**

## 1.1 Religion and the Study of Religion

The first chapter of the well known book *The Study of Religion and Primitive Religions* interestingly begins with a subheading entitled *Perplexities*. Alluding to some examples of the variegated religious activities across the cultures, the author W. Richard Comstock forcefully writes:

Celebration, despair, ethical vigour, mystic retreat, social activism, monastic quietude, contemplation, animal sacrifice, rituals involving pain and terror, images of hope, symbols of fear, the affirmation of life and the struggle against death, creative growth, unthinking superstition – all these are included in the phenomenon that we call religion. Can such a protean phenomenon be studied according to careful methods that will provide reliable knowledge?<sup>1</sup>

After raising this pivotal question he articulates some further difficulties involved in the study of religion. First, the geographical and temporal axes of its subject matter cover virtually every inhabited part of the world and begin from the Palaeolithic age down to the present times. Then, qualitatively the phenomenon of religion is enormously diverse ranging from subjective experiences, social institutions, symbolic systems, beliefs, rituals, and ethical norms to ideals for life in this world as well as techniques for obtaining happiness in another world. Such perplexities are augmented by the fact that religion apparently means quite different things to people belonging to different parts of the world. Then, Comstock hastens to ask again: “How can we ever hope to capture these [diverse and different] meanings in conceptual formulae that will be understandable and acceptable to all concerned?”<sup>2</sup>

Equally interestingly again, about one thousand years before Comstock, an eminent Muslim scholar Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (362/973–443/1048) had been pondering upon the description of a religious conviction that is recognizable by adherents of the respective religion and at the same time satisfies the scholarly community. He wrote in the beginning of his book on Indian religion and culture that if “an author is not alive to the requirements of a

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<sup>1</sup>W. Richard Comstock, *The Study of Religion and Primitive Religions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 3. William Richard Comstock was the first fulltime appointment (1963) at the department of Religious Studies, University of California, Santa Barbra, from where he retired in 1993.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

strictly scientific method, he will procure some superficial information which will satisfy neither the adherent of the doctrine in question nor those who really know it".<sup>3</sup>

The fundamental thrust of such problems and concerns was expressed by a politician in quite simple terms in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the time when the study of religion started to emerge as a full-fledged academic discipline in Europe. When the proposal to establish a Professorship of History of Religions at the Collège de France was mooted,<sup>4</sup> a senator remarked: "How can there be a History of Religions? For either one believes in a religion, and then everything in it appears quite natural; or one does not believe in it, and then everything in it appears absurd!"<sup>5</sup>

The blatant remarks passed by the senator and the passages from both of the above quoted authors basically underline the same dilemma which haunts any attempt to study religion systematically: the protean nature of the subject matter and the differences of the vantage point which inevitably entangles the scholar of religion in a net of difficulties. There is no denying that the objection of the senator was turned down by the subsequent course of history as numerous chairs and departments of the history of religion did come into being and flourish in various universities ever since. The dilemma embedded in his question, however, continues to perpetuate itself, though formulated in more technical terms like the problem of insider's and outsider's perspectives in the study of religion,<sup>6</sup> the relationship between

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<sup>3</sup>Abū Rayhān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī, *Albernuni's India. An account of the religion, philosophy, literature, geography, chronology, astronomy, customs, laws and astrology of India about A.D. 1030 (with notes and indices. By Dr. Edward C. Sachau)*, trans. Edward C. Sachau, 2 vols., vol. 1 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1910), 4.

<sup>4</sup> The chair was created in 1880 and Albert Réville was the first appointeeto it. See Michel Despland, "Sciences of Religion in France During the July Monarchy (1830-1848)," in *Religion in the Making: The Emergence of the Sciences of Religion*, ed. Arie L. Molendijk and Peter Pels, *Studies in the History of Religions (Numen Book Series)* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 31.

<sup>5</sup>E.O. James, "The History, Science and Comparative Study of Religion," *Numen* 1 (1954): 91.

<sup>6</sup>Donald L. Dougherty, "Is Religious Studies Possible?," *Religious Studies* 17 (1981 ). In this lucid paper, the author considers the possibility of religious studies as an autonomous field of study against the backdrop of mutually conflicting insiders' and outsiders' perspectives. For a more detailed study of the issue see, Russell T. McCutcheon, ed., *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (New York: Cassel, 1999).

theological and academic studies of religion,<sup>7</sup> and the question of the identity of the scholar studying religion.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, if Comstock and al-Bīrūnī are right in beginning their respective books with the discussion of problems in the study of religion and the issues raised by them are appropriate then it becomes manifestly clear why multiple tensions and ambiguities surround not only the beginnings of the study of religion but also permeate the whole development of the field, especially from the academic culture of nineteenth century expanding Europe to that of the twenty-first century globalized world. Uncertainty and controversies encompass virtually every aspect, from basic issues such as an appropriate nomenclature of the field of study and a working definition of religion to the more complex theoretical problems like neutrality or objectivity and the formulation of appropriate cross-cultural categories. The fact of the matter is that as a corollary of the perplexities of the phenomenon called religion and the limitations engendered by the vantage point of the investigator, the enterprise of study of religion is intrinsically constrained by epistemological and methodological tensions.

## 1.2 History of the Study of Religion: A Second-Order Tradition

A reading into what may be called the foundational documents of religious studies - then known as *Religionswissenschaft* or science of religion - contributed by scholars like Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900),<sup>9</sup> Cornelius P. Tiele (1830–1902)<sup>10</sup>, and Pierre Daniel

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<sup>7</sup> Several book length studies focus on this issue and propound different points of view. See for instance, Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy* (London: Macmillan, 1999). For another succinct read on this theme see, Linell E. Cady and Delwin Brown, ed., *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002). See also, Ben Quash David Ford, Janet Martin Soskice, *Fields of Faith: theology and religious studies for the twenty-first century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> See for instance, José Ignacio Cabezón & Sheila Greeve Davaney, ed., *Identity and Politics of Scholarship in the Study of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Max Müller, *Chips from a German workshop*, vol. 1: Essays on the Science of religion (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1867).

<sup>10</sup> C. P. Tiele, *Elements of Science of Religion*, vol. 1 (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1897).

Chantepie de la Saussaye (1848–1920)<sup>11</sup> reveals them to be reflections also on the study of religion in addition to the nature of religion itself. If this observation holds true, it can be convincingly argued that the theoretical and methodological debates not only surfaced at the very outset of this field but also account for its coming into being in the first place. It is a particular tradition of second-order reflection which may be seen as one of the distinguishing characteristics of the enterprise of the academic study of religion. This line of argument strikes a chord with Walter H. Capps who opines:

It is axiomatic that collective intellectual ventures do not qualify to be referred to as fields or as disciplines unless they exhibit a second-order tradition. By second-order tradition we refer to a coordinated account of the primary schools of interpretation, methods of approach, traditions of scholarship, and, most significantly, a shared living memory of the ways in which all of these constitutive factors are related to each other. Religious studies owns such a second-order tradition, and it is dependent on the same for the intellectual direction it has taken as well as for the resources on which it is able to draw.<sup>12</sup>

However it needs to be added here that the notion of second-order tradition is somewhat complicated. For instance, Jonathan Z. Smith who is doubtlessly one of the most eminent contemporary theorists of religious studies refers to it with the metaphor of ‘twice-told tale’ – that is, the history of the history of religions. However, the notion of second-order tradition succumbs to obscurity when he sees religion and the study of religion both as the second-order realities. For, he considers myths and rituals as the basic building blocks of religion and understands them as repeated representation. To put it in his own words: “We re-present those re-peated re-presentations embedded in the cultures and cultural formation that comprise our subject matter.”<sup>13</sup> Now, if the work of a scholar is “a representation rather

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<sup>11</sup>Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Tübingen: Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1905).

<sup>12</sup>Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), xv-xvi.

<sup>13</sup>Jonathan Z. Smith, "A Twice-Told Tale: The History of the History of Religion's History," *Numen* 48, no. 2 (2001): 131. It may be noted here that Karl R. Popper had already used the metaphor of storytelling while elaborating the second-order nature of the scientific tradition. See Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963; reprint, 4th (revised) 1972), 127.



than a claimed presence”,<sup>14</sup> and the discipline of religious studies and its subject matter are both second-order realities, the apt question is, ‘second’ to what? In other words, what is the first-order reality, then?

Contextualizing the above question, Clifford Geertz had earlier pointed out that “the line between the mode of representation and substantive content is as undrawable in cultural analysis as it is in painting”<sup>15</sup> About a decade later, Smith brought home this idea to religious studies, perhaps more robustly than Geertz intended it with regard to Anthropology. Smith plainly declared that “there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study”.<sup>16</sup> Just as simple mathematics tells us, multiplication of a negative value by a positive one gives the sum in negative. Following this line to its logical conclusion, Smith’s assertion had the potential to nullify both religion and its history. Thus, Smith’s twice-told tale appears something like telling a tale and then saying that it was all bluff. As it has been noted by Hans G. Kippenberg, the story actually took such a turn. He sees a dilemma of break between facts and their representation and between past and present operative behind the disappearance of the entry ‘history’ from the important lexicons of religious studies<sup>17</sup> like *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*<sup>18</sup> and *Guide to the Study of Religion*.<sup>19</sup> This flies in the face of too much of ‘history’ in the subheading of Smith’s article quoted above, namely “The History of the History of Religion’s History”. The reason for the vanishing of ‘history’ as an important term from religious-studies dictionaries is clear; if religion is taken as a mere scholarly construction of the modern Western academy then there is no use in searching for its history. The history of the study of religions becomes a substitute for the history of

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<sup>14</sup>Smith, "A Twice-Told Tale: The History of the History of Religion's History," 141.

<sup>15</sup>Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 16.

<sup>16</sup>Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.

<sup>17</sup>Hans G. Kippenberg, "Religious History, Displaced by Modernity," *Numen* 47, no. 3 (2000): 221-22.

<sup>18</sup>Mark C Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>19</sup>Willi Braun Russell T. McCutcheon, ed., *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 2000).

religions.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the second-order saturates the first-order to the extent of supplanting it – which makes religious studies look like standing head down.

Indeed, the coming into being of early *Religionswissenschaft* was indebted to the second-order reflections but a birth head down is natural while standing head down is not. How can the scholarly representations make up a tradition in complete isolation from historical realities of the world of religions? The pendulum seems to have swung too far in one direction. In the words of Gustavo Benavides “if there were no data for religion, then there would be data neither for its history nor, *a fortiori*, for the second-order reflection on the writing of such history, namely historiography.”<sup>21</sup> The truth lies somewhere in between stark constructionism and naked objectivism. A balanced theory of history is not inconceivable which neither conceals the constructive and interpretive elements nor disconnects the observable facts of the past from their representation in the present.<sup>22</sup>

Applied to religious studies, the history of study of religion and the religious history of a given period can and should be seen in their mutuality and reciprocity.<sup>23</sup> The religious situation of a given span of time and space influences and regulates theories, methodologies, and categories of scholars,<sup>24</sup> provided they are doing good scholarship, while on the other end of the scale scholarly perceptions and constructions about religion, too, affect the world of

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<sup>20</sup>Christoph Schwöbel, "The History of Religions and the Study of Religions: A Response to Hans Kippenberg," in *The Future of the Study of Religion* ed. Slavica Jakelić and Lori Pearson (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 65.

<sup>21</sup>Gustavo Benavides, "There Is Data for Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 4 (2003): 895.

<sup>22</sup>Kocku von Stuckrad, "Relative, Contingent, Determined: The Category "History" and Its Methodological Dilemma," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 4 (2003): 911.

<sup>23</sup> For a book length study on this interesting theme see, James G. Crossley & Christian Karner, ed., *Writing History, Constructing Religion* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> A clear exposition of this dimension of the interplay can be found in a book chapter "How Descriptions of the History of Religion Reflect Modernization" in Hans G. Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 187-95. A general example is that in the nineteenth century Western scholarship, *Muhammadanism* was a widely used term to refer to Islam but after coming in contact with the "subject matter", scholars realized the inadequacy of this construction and dropped it off.

religions.<sup>25</sup> As expressed by Christoph Schwöbel “It would be a worthwhile enterprise to investigate the exact nature of the interplay between the history of religious studies and the history of religions.”<sup>26</sup> The view of reciprocal interaction of historical facts of religions and their scholarly representations implies that the history of religious studies cannot simply substitute the history of religions themselves. Therefore, while keeping in view all these intricacies, in this dissertation the term ‘second-order tradition’ refers to a) reflections on theory and method in the study of religion, and b) history of the study of religion.

### 1.3 The Study of Religion as Representation

The above discussion sheds light on the relationship between religious history and the history of its representation, that is, the history of study of religions. The notion of representation calls for some explanation here. Representation contrasts presence, true as it may be, simply removing the prefix “re” can demonstrate that representation connects to the idea of presentation, too. In this light, the syntax of representation requires a subject and two objects: a subject (re)presenting object<sub>1</sub> to object<sub>2</sub>. Naturally, object<sub>1</sub> should have presented itself to object<sub>2</sub> in which case presentation would mean mere presence. However, speaking of cultural artifacts this rarely occurs, if at all. Even when speaking of one’s own group, one is speaking *for* his/her group and therefore representing it. It is only because object<sub>1</sub> is somehow unable to present itself, or is deprived of self-presentation by another entity through dynamics of power, that its status is reduced from that of an active agent to that of a passive and mute object. In all probability, object<sub>1</sub> is not in fact silent but its voice sinks into the subjectivity of the representing subject. Thus, representation by definition implies silence or silencing of the

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<sup>25</sup> The works that consider religion a mere conceptual category of modern Western scholarship imposed on the non-Western cultures can be cited as example. See for instance Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University press, 1993). Another classic example is the term “Hinduism” which initially was a mere scholarly construction but nowadays Hindus have adopted it to refer to their religion. This example indicates the extent to which the scholarly representations can affect and influence their objects of study.

<sup>26</sup> Schwöbel, “The History of Religions and the Study of Religions: A Response to Hans Kippenberg,” 66.

entity being represented. In order for representation to occur, the representing agent must perceive object<sub>1</sub> and then acting as a medium (re)present it to object<sub>2</sub>.

The act of representation will be credible if the mediating agent first perceives object<sub>1</sub> accurately and then transparently (re)presents it to object<sub>2</sub>. A deficient perception of object<sub>1</sub> or any distorted communication to object<sub>2</sub> coloured, for example, by the ideological, religious or political motives of the mediating agent will place a question mark on the credibility of the whole process of representation. On the other hand, representation would be illuminating should the mediating agent bridge communication gap between the two sides of the supposed divide through systematizing, categorizing and comparing the information and thus bringing the worlds of object<sub>1</sub> and object<sub>2</sub> into some common relationship. But what if object<sub>1</sub> speaks out turning the coordinates of representation upside down? Will it simply drop off the “re” of representation or add another one and make it re-representation?

Let us connect back this question with the preceding discussion of second-order tradition of religious studies. It is maintained here that if the study of religion has to become a cross-cultural venture, as majority of the scholars would agree it should, it does not seem plausible to stick to the conventional conviction that the “scientific” study of religion began only in the second half of the nineteenth century Europe. Religious studies cannot become truly cross-cultural by taking into account different cultures only as mute data to be analysed, interpreted, and represented. It needs to be recognized that different cultures and civilizations have had their own peculiar traditions of scholarship, possibly including the study of religion.<sup>27</sup> In fact, scholars from different cultural traditions have been studying, explaining, and discussing various aspects of the phenomenon of religion. These studies may not be identical in character with the nineteenth century *Religionswissenschaft* but certainly not all of them were always expressions of some dogmatic or religious position as scholars like Reinhard Pummer claim.<sup>28</sup> The present study assumes this contention and moves ahead to

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<sup>27</sup> For instance, Michael Pye, the former president of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), has discovered that already in the eighteenth century, a tradition of critical, comparative, and historical study of religion existed in Japan independent of the developments in Europe. See, Michael Pye, “Westernism Unmasked,” in *Secular Theories on Religion: Current Perspectives*, ed. Mikael Rothstein Tim Jensen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000), 224.

<sup>28</sup> Reinhard Pummer, “Religionswissenschaft or *Religiology*?,” *Numen* 19, no. 2-3 (1972): 94.

examine what sort of dynamics come into play when two different intellectual traditions interact with each other at both first- and second-order levels. In other words, the study examines the dynamics of encounters that come into play when those who are usually represented tend not only to scrutinize the scholarly perceptions and representations of their culture and religion but also speak about their understanding of what they perceive as their cultural or religious Others. The query is structured with reference to the Western and Muslim histories of the study of religion, taking both of them as mutually interacting yet distinct scholarly traditions. However, before moving ahead it seems imperative to explicate the terminology of Western and Muslim traditions in the study of religion.

## 1.4 Western and Muslim Traditions in the Study of Religion

The academic study of religion which emerged in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe as a distinct field or discipline and today thrives in the western academy has been designated with different names. It is well-known that Max Müller coined the German word *Religionswissenschaft* – science of religion – in 1867<sup>29</sup> which subsequently became an umbrella expression to denote a number of subfields that study religion presumably in the academic spirit. In the absence of an appropriate English equivalent of the original German expression *Religionswissenschaft* or *Allgemeine Religionswissenschaft*, various terms like history of religions, phenomenology of religion, and comparative religion came into use by different scholars in order to refer to more or less the same area of study. Initially, Comparative Religion became a common term in the English speaking world owing to the then dominant evolutionary paradigm with its associated comparative method. But it risked to be mistaken for some normative comparison of religions in terms of their ultimate value, which was not the objective of the comparativists, at least not overtly.<sup>30</sup> Because of this consideration, the alternative History of Religions became more popular. The difficulty did not lie simply in translatability, however. Many historians had little in common with comparativists and vice versa.<sup>31</sup> This is not to say that these alternative nomenclatures

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<sup>29</sup>Müller, *Chips from a German workshop*. However, it may be noted that the term *Religionswissenschaft* had been used before Müller but in a different sense; see Douglas Allen, *Structure & Creativity in Religion: Hermeneutics in Mircea Eliade's Phenomenology and New Directions* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1978), 3: footnote 1.

<sup>30</sup>Though it has been pointed out that the Darwinian paradigm during the early *Religionswissenschaft* underscored the relative superiority of Christianity over other religions, the interface of Christianity, and for that matter Christian theology and religious studies has been and continues to be a complex and heatedly debated issue. For a detailed thematic and historical treatment of the topic see Sigurd Hjelde, *Die Religionswissenschaft und das Christentum: Eine historische Untersuchung über das Verhältnis von Religionswissenschaft und Theologie*, ed. H.G. Kippenberg and E. T. Lawson, *Studies in the History of Religions* (Numen Bookseries) (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

<sup>31</sup>Allen, *Structure & Creativity in Religion: Hermeneutics in Mircea Eliade's Phenomenology and New Directions*, 3.

necessarily signify methodological emphases.<sup>32</sup> For instance, the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) and its national affiliates still retain History of Religions as a part of their nomenclatures though the word 'history' here does not refer to a methodological posture.

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century *religious studies* has become the foremost term. It has the merit of being neutral with reference to different methodological postures and is broad enough to include the whole spectrum of approaches and tendencies which scholars may choose or pursue, and perhaps different cultural contexts and perspectives on the study of religion as well. However, the very luxury to encompass everything entails ambiguity. To paraphrase Kitagawa, the term religious studies lacks sufficient clarity, and the university departments with this label are sometimes staffed with theologians, ministers or rabbis who may have academic credentials but have little understanding about the academic study of religion. Some programmes offered under the title of religious studies seem to be a jumble of unrelated courses like psychology of religion offered by the psychology department, sociology of religion from the sociology department and so on.<sup>33</sup> A similar observation has been made by Eric J. Sharpe: "Comparative Religion has always been multidisciplinary, and as comparative religion has broadened out into religious studies, the extent and variety of the available disciplinary options have increased to a bewildering extent."<sup>34</sup>

This state of affairs leads to an impression that religious studies is not only a broad but also an imprecise term lacking distinctive characteristics of a discipline. In order to

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<sup>32</sup> Apart from some exceptions, a brief retrospection of the name game roughly points to the course of main developmental stages which the enterprise of the academic study of religion has gone through. *Religionswissenschaft* implied an integrated view of science and religion with science having a somewhat privileged position. Then the term *comparative religion* refers to the prevalent Darwinism as a paradigm in the earlier phase. By the mid-twentieth century two competing terms got currency: the *phenomenology of religion* and *history of religions*, which were in fact two different approaches to religion. More recently, a methodologically neutral term *religious studies* is taking precedence over the previous nomenclatures, which signifies a realization that no methodological principle or approach unites the complex field.

<sup>33</sup> Joseph M. Kitagawa, "Humanistic and Theological History of Religions with Special Reference to the North American Scene," *Numen* 27, no. 2 (1980): 210.

<sup>34</sup> Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd ed. (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1986), 317.

establish the disciplinary identity, two parameters are indispensable: a distinguished method or canon of methods and a well defined object of study. There seems to be a sort of consensus that the discipline of religious studies does not have a distinct method of its own. The adequacy of the category 'religion' which accounts for the theoretical object of study is also under scrutiny from different camps of critics. Against the background of these constraints, rather than being a well defined discipline, religious studies appears to be a composite field of studies to the exclusion of no data that are part of the history of religion, and of no method. The only exception seems to be those methods which clearly centre upon one religious tradition like dogmatic theology.<sup>35</sup>

The pressing question then is on what account religious studies can be referred to as a distinct and integrated discipline or field? Let us consider how an illustrious scholar like Peter Byrne deals with this question:

I shall use the phrase "the study of religion" to refer to the unified, non-confessional investigation of religion in the context of a university school of humanities. The phrase will be used to denote a distinct, demarcated field of study in which scholars from different specialist disciplines mutually engage in the investigation of religion as a human phenomenon.<sup>36</sup>

The quotation clearly indicates that what makes religious studies a "unified field" is basically the institutional arrangement which brings scholars from different disciplines together. The other important clue is the "non-confessional investigation" of "religion as a human phenomenon". Again the "non-confessional investigation" can be understood against the background of the idea of modern university. In the context of bifurcation of state and church on the one hand and public and private on the other, the modern university is a state-patronized and public institution. Religion in this schema is conceived of as belonging to the private sphere. However, beneath this simple dichotomy are the complexities as the public and private sphere intersect with each other. For instance, when religion is institutionalized as

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<sup>35</sup>Frank Whaling, ed., *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion*, 2 vols., vol. 1: The Humanities, Religion and Reason (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1983), 23-25.

<sup>36</sup>Peter Byrne, "The Foundations of the Study of Religion in the British Context," in *Religion in the Making: The Emergence of the Sciences of Religion*, ed. Arie L. Molendijk and Peter Pels, *Studies in the History of Religions (Numen Book Series)* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 45.



a church or some sort of social group it overlaps with the public sphere. In an analogous way, the modern university cannot simply stay aloof from religious aspects of culture and history. However, as a public and state-patronized institution the modern university needs to distance itself from religion while taking its existence into account – a distance between religion and the study of religion, or that of between teaching religion and teaching about religion. Taking “religion as a human phenomenon” signifies precisely this distance. It renders any judgement, positive or negative, on the transcendental referent of religion irrelevant and thus epistemologically creates the necessary distance.

Moving along this line, religious studies needs to be understood in view of the specific cultural experience of modern western societies. Its identity markers are to be sought not in some methodological or theoretical nuances but in the concrete history of the incremental societies and socially diversifying institutions which caused its coming into being and in which it is embedded. Since it belongs to the cultural history of identifiable societies and emerged in specific university departments, it can be meaningfully referred to as a continuous historical tradition. Instead of succumbing to the theoretically loaded and problematic terms like normative-descriptive, explanatory-hermeneutical, multidisciplinary, poly-methodic and so on, suffice it to identify religious studies as that discursive field of studies of religion which flourished in the pioneering university departments of Amsterdam, Leipzig, Marburg, Uppsala, Lancaster, Chicago, McGill etcetera and today exists in most of the important European and North American universities. This shift from abstract ideals to concrete instances and from theoretical nuances to historical experiences paves the way for a conception of religious studies as a historical tradition.

Endorsing Pascal Boyer’s definition of tradition “as a type of interaction which results in the repetition of certain communicative events”,<sup>37</sup> religious studies can be viewed as a field of interaction between a particular scholarly community. More often than not the mode of communication within this community is textual.<sup>38</sup> The works produced by the scholars

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<sup>37</sup>Pascal Boyer, *Tradition as Truth and Communication: A cognitive description of traditional discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 23.

<sup>38</sup> Gavin Flood’s thesis of religious studies as corrective reading bears relevance to the point made above. See Gavin Flood, “The study of religion as corrective reading,” in *Fields of Faith: theology and religious studies for the twenty-first century*, ed. Ben Quash David Ford, Janet Martin Soskice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

associated with the respective academic institutions make up a cluster of texts of religious studies. These texts function in their entirety as a critical mass in the sense that any single text becomes largely self-referential with regard to this textual totality. The self-referential character guarantees that any new entry is not cut off from the historical continuity of the tradition. A work not grounded in the body of these texts and falling short of the self-referential character becomes alienated from the intellectual tradition, and this renders it deficient and lacking scientific or academic merits. The tradition thus establishes a tacit standard for what counts as scholarship by producing a master narrative (*isnād*). In this light, the role of bibliography of a scholarly work is not simply suggestions for further reading; it amounts to a claim of authenticity, legitimacy, and authority through participation in the tradition. In addition to such textual continuity and canon, religious studies can be construed as a tradition with reference to the teacher-student genealogies which the institutional patronage of academic bodies generates. The critical mass of texts and student-teacher genealogies together serve as the identity markers of religious studies as a continuous intellectual tradition and also provide for a tacit standard of acceptable scholarship. Thus regarding religious studies as a historical tradition provides for the precision which this broad and all encompassing term otherwise lacks. The question of the distinguishing features of religious studies becomes problematic when a common thread is sought in different approaches and methods while in fact such a thread does not exist. Religious studies is not like a bead strung through with a single thread, instead it resembles a bunch of colourful threads twisted together to form a rope. No thread in a rope is more essential or indispensable than any other.

The notion of tradition itself needs some clarification as it is heavily relied on in the course of this study. It is a neglected term in religious studies perhaps due to the presumed science-religion and tradition-modernity dichotomies.<sup>39</sup> First of all, it is maintained that

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<sup>39</sup>Gregory P. Grieve & Richard Weiss, "Illuminating the Half-Life of Tradition: Legitimation, Agency, and Counter-Hegemonies," in *Historicizing "Tradition" in the Study of Religion*, ed. Steven Engler & Gregory P. Grieve (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005). There are some notable exceptions, however, to this over all negligence of the notion of tradition in religious studies. Instances being: Barbara Schoppelreich & Siegfried Wiedenhofer, ed., *Zur Logik religiöser Traditionen* (Frankfurt am Main: IKO - Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 1998), Jan Willem van Henten and Anton Houtepen, ed., *Religious Identity and the Invention of Tradition: Papers read at a NOSTER Conference in Soesterberg, January 4-6, 1999*, Studies in Theology and Religion (STAR) (Assen, The Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum, 2001).

tradition is not necessarily the antithesis of modernity as commonly perceived. This misplaced polarity is based on certain fallacies like considering tradition and modernity mutually conflicting or exclusive systems.<sup>40</sup> Philosophically, Karl R. Popper had already pointed out something to a similar effect, that tradition is not necessarily anti-rational. It is our attitude towards tradition which can be either critical and rational or uncritical and irrational. In fact he ventured to conflate tradition and rationality by moving towards a rational theory of tradition and cherished the scientific tradition as “our invaluable rationalist tradition”.<sup>41</sup> It need not be emphasized that Popper's use of the adjectival phrases “scientific tradition” and “rationalist tradition” is supportive of the above rendering of religious studies as an intellectual tradition. Here modernity itself is construed as a tradition.

The strategy of identification of religious studies with reference to a particular scholarly community which interacts through textual and institutional communication also brings relief to the task of defining the other pole term of this study – the Muslim study of religions. In the recent past, an assortment of literature has appeared that discusses and analyzes what may be called the classical Muslim studies of other religions such as al-Bīrūnī's book on Indian religions and culture and al-Shahrastānī's taxonomical description of different religions and schools of thought. The said literature refers to these and similar classical studies using a variety of expressions, for instance, the Muslim scholarship in *Religionswissenschaft*,<sup>42</sup> the Muslim perceptions of other religions,<sup>43</sup> Muslim contribution to

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<sup>40</sup> See for instance, Joseph R. Gusfield, "Tradition and Modernity: Misplaced Polarities in the Study of Social Change," *The American Journal of Sociology* 72, no. 4 (1967): 352-58. Gusfield's contention is based on an empirical sociological study of the Indian society. Perhaps to avoid this tradition-modernity dichotomy Homi K. Bhabha uses a phrase “otherwise than modernity” to contrast modernity. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge Classics ed. (London/New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>41</sup> Karl R. Popper, "Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition," in *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963; reprint, Fourth (revised) 1972), 121-22. This book chapter is based on a lecture delivered by Popper in 1948.

<sup>42</sup> Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman, *Early Muslim Scholarship in Religionswissenschaft* (Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), 2003).

<sup>43</sup> Jacques Waardenburg, *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

the academic study of religion,<sup>44</sup> Muslim understanding of other religions,<sup>45</sup> Islamic heresiography, Islamic history of religions, Muslim literature on religious others,<sup>46</sup> Muslim critique of other religions,<sup>47</sup> and Islamicate history of religions.<sup>48</sup> These nomenclatures used for a body of ancient literature are bewildering not so much because of the lack of their mutual agreement but for the retrospective application of the contemporary scholarly constructions like academic study, history of religions, and *Religionswissenschaft*. The adequacy of these nomenclatures is debatable as they imply projection of the contemporary constructions to a body of literature that was produced several centuries before and in quite a different cultural milieu. The question remains to be asked how far such implicitly judgmental terms reflect the contemporary scholars' perspectives in comparison with the historical reality which they supposedly allude to. However, part of the problem is that the mass of literature referred to with the above mentioned nomenclatures itself appeared under a variety of labels like *al-firaq* (sectarian or religious divisions), *al-maqālāt* (treatises), *al-milal wa al-niḥal* (religious communities and philosophical schools), *al-munāẓrāt* (polemics), and *al-rudūd* (refutations). The diversity of these genres is reflective of the multiplicity of motives behind the production of these literary genres and the approaches adopted therein.

Apart from this classical heritage, in the contemporary Muslim world there is a growing mass of literature on the so-called world religions and different comparative religious issues. These works appear in Arabic and other oriental languages like Turkish,

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<sup>44</sup>Muhammad Khalīfah Hasan Ahmad Khalīfah, "Medieval Jewish-Muslim Contribution to the Academic Study of Religion: A Study of the Methodology of Saadia Al Fayyūmī and Muhammad Al Shahrastānī" (Temple University, 1976).

<sup>45</sup>Ghulam Haider Aasi, *Muslim Understanding of Other Religions: A Study of Ibn Hazm's Kitāb al-Fasl fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwā' wa al-Nihal* (Islamabad: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1999).

<sup>46</sup>Patrice Claude Brodeur, "From an Islamic Heresiography to an Islamic History of Religions: Modern Arab Muslim Literature on 'Religious Others' with Special Reference to Three Egyptian Authors" (Harvard University, 1999).

<sup>47</sup>Gabriel Said Reynolds, *A Muslim Theologian in the Sectarian Milieu: 'Abd al-Jabbār and the Critique of Christian Origins* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

<sup>48</sup>Steven M. Wasserstrom, "Islamicate History of Religions?," *History of Religions* 27, no. 4 (1988).

Urdu, Malay and Persian as well as in English. This new wave of studies on other religions is mainly related to the modern university system. A sizeable number of the universities in today's Muslim world incorporate departments of comparative religions (*muqāranat al-adyān*) such as the Department of Comparative Religions, International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan; Department of Comparative Religion and Islamic Culture, University of Sindh, Pakistan; Department of Comparative Religion, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta, Indonesia; Department of *Usūl al-Dīn* & Comparative Religion, International Islamic University Malaysia; Department of World's Religions, University of Ankara, Turkey; Department of Comparative Religion and Mysticism, University of Tehran, Iran; and Department of Religions, University of Ilorin, Nigeria, to mention a few. Now, the institution of university in the Muslim world contrasts the indigenous educational institutions (*madrasas*) and therefore can be seen as having remarkable western influence. However to infer that the study of religions carried out in these university departments is a plain imitation of the contemporary western religious studies will be simplistic. In fact, a complex mechanism of adaptation and critical appropriation of the contemporary approaches to religion and those of the indigenous scholarship is discernable.

The resultant studies on religions and the second-order reflections on the nature of the study of religion make up a cluster of texts which function as critical mass establishing the self-referential character as explicated above with regard to western religious studies. This is specifically true of the texts in Arabic and English languages both of which function as the *lingua franca* among the scholarly communities across the Muslim countries. Again, we have an identifiable corpus of texts and empirically traceable teacher-student genealogies generated through the continuity of university departments. Against this backdrop, the Muslim tradition of study of religions is defined here with reference to this cluster of texts, the classical texts included, and the student-teacher genealogies developed in particular university departments in Cairo, Islamabad, Kuala Lumpur, Tehran, Istanbul and so on, and with the minimum theoretical qualification of excluding those works and methods which are overtly confessional or polemic.

It needs to be added here for clarity's sake, that hereafter the apparently neutral expression 'religious studies' would always mean modern western religious studies. The

qualified expression: 'Muslim study of religions' refers both to classical<sup>49</sup> as well as contemporary contributions of Muslim scholars although the study focuses primarily on post-*Religionswissenschaft* encounters. The Arabic term *al-milal wa al-niḥal* (religious denominations and sects) signifies the descriptive scholarship on different religions that appeared in Muslim cultural history before the modern times.

## 1.5 Research Questions

As stated above, today several studies have appeared that pertain to discussion and analysis of Muslim contributions to the study of religion(s). More often than not, these discussions are informed of the broader framework and approaches that are peculiar to religious studies. Both Western and Muslim scholars have contributed to this growing body of literature. Broadly speaking, the writings of Western authors can be classified into three types. Firstly, there are some studies on the history of Muslim perceptions of other religions in general, especially before the modern period, often accompanied by methodological analyses. Perhaps the most important in this category is the work of Jacques Waardenburg who has dealt with this topic at considerable length.<sup>50</sup> Another promising though not yet as widely known name is Patrice C. Brodeur who has undertaken two brilliant dissertations on the Muslim study of other religions, one for his MA and the other for PhD.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, both the studies are to date unpublished. Other writers have focussed on the Muslim study or perceptions of a particular religion like Christianity and Judaism or a religious theme such as

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<sup>49</sup> The term "classical" is tricky. In this study it simply refers to Muslim scholarship on different religions before coming into contact with the European religious studies.

<sup>50</sup> Waardenburg, *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*. Jacques Waardenburg, *Muslims and Others: Relations in Context*, ed. Jacques Waardenburg, Religion and Reason (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), Jacques Waardenburg, *Muslim as Actors: Islamic Meanings and Muslim Interpretations in the Perspective of the Study of Religions*, ed. Jacques Waardenburg, vol. 46, Religion and Reason (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007).

<sup>51</sup> See, Patrice C. Brodeur, "Contemporary Muslim Approaches to the Study of Religion: A Comparative Analysis of Three Egyptian Authors" (McGill University, 1989). Brodeur, "From an Islamic Heresiography to an Islamic History of Religions: Modern Arab Muslim Literature on 'Religious Others' with Special Reference to Three Egyptian Authors".

trinity and Bible. In this category falls the work of David Thomas who has written extensively on the Muslim study of Christianity,<sup>52</sup> and that of Kamila Adang who has published on Muslim views of Judaism.<sup>53</sup> Lastly, a cluster of studies deal with the writings of specific Muslim authors and analyze their methodologies and sometimes compare them with the modern ones. Here mention can be made of the Bruce Lawrence's *Shaharastānī on the Indian Religions*,<sup>54</sup> Samuel-Martin Behloul's methodological analysis of Ibn Hazm's biblical criticism,<sup>55</sup> and a relatively recent interpretive study of al-Bīrūnī's approach to religions undertaken by Wassilios Klein.<sup>56</sup>

On the other hand, several contemporary Muslim intellectuals have come up with second-order reflections on the study of religion in Muslim and western context. The work of these scholars can be viewed from at least two angles. Firstly, there are authors who have appropriated the classical Muslim contributions in the study of religions. Here mention can be made of Ghulam Haider Aasi's book *Muslim Understanding of Other Religions*<sup>57</sup> and Maḥmūd 'Alī Ḥimāyah's appraisal of Ibn Ḥazm's methodology in the study of religion.<sup>58</sup> Some of these authors enthusiastically claim that the Muslim cultural history

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<sup>52</sup>David Thomas, ed., *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity: Abū 'Īsa al-Warrāq's "Against the Incarnation"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), David Thomas, ed., *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity: Abū 'Īsa al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), David Thomas, *Christian Doctrines in Islamic Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

<sup>53</sup>Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996).

<sup>54</sup>Bruce B. Lawrence, *Shaharastānī on the Indian Religions*, ed. Leo Laeyendecker and Jacques Waardenburg, Religion and Society (The Hague: Mouton, 1976).

<sup>55</sup>Samuel-Martin Behloul, *Ibn Ḥazm's Evangelienkritik: Eine methodische Untersuchung* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

<sup>56</sup>Wassilios Klein, *Abu Reyhan Biruni und die Religionen. Eine interkulturelle Perspektive* (Nordhausen: Traugott Bautz, 2005).

<sup>57</sup>Ghulam Haider Aasi, *Muslim Understanding of Other Religions: A Study of Ibn Ḥazm's Kitāb al-Faṣl fī al-Milal wa al-Ahwā' wa al-Niḥal* (Islamabad: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1999).

<sup>58</sup>Maḥmūd 'Alī Ḥimāyah, *Ibn Ḥazm wa-Manhajuhu fī Dirāsāt al-Adyān (Ibn Ḥazm and His Methodology in the Study of Religions)* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1983).

pioneered the descriptive study of religions long before such studies emerged in nineteenth century Europe and tend to draw parallels between the contemporary religious studies and the classical Muslim scholarship in this field.<sup>59</sup>

The second dimension of the Muslim scholars' second-order reflections on the study of religion is the critique of the discipline of religious studies. For instance, Talal Asad has developed a powerful argument by locating the genealogies of religion in particular cultural history of Europe showing how the discipline of religious studies is contingent on that cultural heritage.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Seyyed Hossein Nasr adopts a critical view of religious studies in a number of his writings. The basic thrust of his argument is that the embedded secularism of the modern approaches to religion forestalls any possibility of a profound understanding of the essence of religion.<sup>61</sup> In fact, this line of argument is shared by many of the contemporary Muslim intellectuals.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> See for instance, Kamaruzaman, *Early Muslim Scholarship in Religionswissenschaft*. See also, Muḥammad Khalīfah Ḥasan Aḥmad Khalīfah, "Medieval Jewish-Muslim Contribution to the Academic Study of Religion: A Study of the Methodology of Saadia Al Fayyūmī and Muḥammad Al Shahrastānī" (Temple University, 1976). See also, 'Isa Muhammad Maishanu, "The Comparative Method in the Study of Religion: A Case Study of Al-'Amiri and Al-Biruni and Some Selected Modern Western Approaches" (International Islamic University Islamabad, 1999).

<sup>60</sup> Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*.

<sup>61</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1993), Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The *Philosophia Perennis* and the Study of Religion," in *The Word's Religious Traditions: Current Perspectives in Religious Studies*, ed. Frank Whaling (New York: Crossroad, 1986).

<sup>62</sup> Dīn Muḥammad, "Mushkilat al-Manhaj fī 'Ilm al-Dīn al-Muqārīn fī al-Gharb (The Problem of Method in the Science of Comparative Religion in the West)," *Annual Journal of the International Islamic University/Hawliyyat al-Jāmi'ah al-'Islāmiyyah al-'Ālamiyyah* 1 (1993). Dīn Muḥammad, "Al-Itijāh al-Zāhiratī fī Dirāsāt al-'Adyān: Ru'yah Naqdiyyah (The Phenomenological Approach in the Study of Religion in the West: A Critical View)," *Annual Journal of the International Islamic University/Hawliyyat al-Jāmi'ah al-'Islāmiyyah al-'Ālamiyyah* 6 (1998). See also, Suleman Dangor, "The Attitude of Muslim Scholars to New Approaches in Religious Studies," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 10, no. 2 (1993).



This concise overview of Western appraisals of the Muslim approaches to religions on the one hand and the Muslim appropriations of religious studies on the other, points to a burgeoning second-order tradition of mutual perceptions. Thus, it seems to be a worthwhile undertaking to take stock of such mutual appraisals and to venture an interpretation of this encounter in a theoretical framework that could potentially present a coherent picture of things. This is what the present study intends to accomplish.

More precisely, the present study addresses three interconnected questions: In the first place, how the study of religion in both the knowledge traditions emerged as a result of encounter with religious and/or cultural other and how the fact of this encounter relates to disciplinary self-perceptions? Secondly, how the negotiations of disciplinary identities relate to the second-order mutual appropriations, in our case the western appraisals of the Muslim study of religion and the Muslim views of the western study of religion? Lastly, what sort of reflexivity, reciprocity, and mutuality has emerged, if any, as the result of encounters of the two knowledge traditions? The last question relates to the possibility of an overlapping disciplinary space signifying a movement toward a truly global religious studies, but the present study does not deal with this issue directly.

## **1.6 Scholarly Traditions in Interaction: Towards a Theoretical Framework**

The encounter of Muslim and western disciplinary traditions in the study of religion, which have emerged and developed against specific cultural backgrounds, can be conceptually framed with reference to three possible postures: dominance, defence, and creative symbiosis. By the posture of dominance it is meant here that owing to a favourable power relationship, a scholarly tradition can assume universal validation of its theories, methodologies, and other conceptual constructs regardless of the historical and cultural location of the subject matter under scrutiny and the identity of the scholar studying it. Such universalistic self-image can easily lead to the idea of transplantation of a knowledge tradition to other cultures. For instance, Popper hints at the idea of transplantation of rational tradition to other places. To quote him: "I have seen that it is very difficult to transplant it [scientific tradition] from the few places where it has really taken root. ... recent attempts to transplant it from England overseas have not been too successful."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Popper, "Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition," 121.

Here it can be seen that the idea of transplantation of the English rational tradition to other cultures is based on the universalistic self-perception of the Enlightenment ideals, which many of the post-colonial theorists would find problematic as, among other problems, it downplays the subtle nuances of the notion of rationality and its relation to the cultural differences.<sup>64</sup> Also the homogenized and linear view of modernity seemingly taken for granted in Popper's above quotation has been convincingly contested by scholars like Eisenstadt who has suggested the existence of multiple modernities in the history of human civilization.<sup>65</sup>

The idea of the transplantation of traditions implies moving a tradition spatially, that is from one cultural space to another one. A closely related notion is the 'invention of traditions' propounded by Eric Hobsbawm in which the movement of traditional materials is seen along the axis of time, that is from past to present. The 'invention of tradition' can be employed as quite a helpful conceptual tool to explain the defence posture of the perceivably threatened local cultural traditions. The notion means, in simple terms, that sometimes old traditional elements are used to invent a tradition in order to establish continuity with the historic past. According to Hobsbawm, the term 'invented tradition' applies both to the traditions actually invented and instituted and to those emerging rapidly within a brief and dateable period.<sup>66</sup> Apparently, in the case of invention of a tradition the other cultures can function as catalyst but they do not provide for the constituent materials. The invented tradition is called 'invented' because it creates a false impression of continuity with past and conceals the break in the line of continuity. To quote Hobsbawm:

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<sup>64</sup> For a profound analysis of the cultural differences and different senses of rationality see Richard Rorty, "A Pragmatic View of Rationality and Cultural Difference," *Philosophy East and West* 42, no. 4 (1992).

<sup>65</sup> S. N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000): 1-3. See also, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "The Transformations of the Religious Dimension in the Constitution of Contemporary Modernities - The Contemporary Religious Sphere in the Context of Multiple Modernities," in *Religion im kulturellen Diskurs/Religion in Cultural Discourse: Festschrift Für Hans G. Kippenberg Zu Seinem 65. Geburtstag/Essays in Honor of Hans G. Kippenberg on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Brigitte Luchesi & Kocku von Stuckrad (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004).

<sup>66</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *Past and Present Publications* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; reprint, 1988), 1.

Such a break is visible even in movements deliberately describing themselves as ‘traditionalist’, and appealing to groups which were, by common consent, regarded as the repositories of historic continuity and tradition, such as peasants. Indeed the very appearance of movements for the defence or revival of traditions, ‘traditionalist’ or otherwise, indicates such a break.<sup>67</sup>

However the question arises about the new materials that are grafted over the old ones to invent a tradition. For, if all the constituent elements of a tradition in fact come from the past it will be a genuine tradition not an invented one. The possible source of the new elements can be either other traditions or creative appropriation of the indigenous tradition. If this reading of the dynamics of invention of tradition seems credible, it points to a tripartite ambivalence, that is, towards the indigenous tradition, its perceived other(s), and past. Thus, the phenomenon presents a complex interface of critique of traditions – both indigenous and its perceived other – on the one hand and their re-appropriation and adaptation on the other.

In the background of this interface a defence mechanism of the autochthonic cultures can be seen against the dominant knowledge traditions in the age of globalization, that is to say, instead of simply staying at the receiving end the local cultures turn to their own past for traditional materials. In other words, they strive to defend their cultural spaces by retreating in time. This conclusion is in line with Homi K. Bhabha’s enunciation of cultural differences which questions the binary split of past and present as well as tradition and modernity. He writes: “It is the problem of how, in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic.”<sup>68</sup>

Thus far about the postures of dominance and defence; the third possible outcome of the interaction of two or more knowledge traditions can be creative symbiosis. An obvious pre-requisite for a creative symbiosis to occur is reorganization of the possibility of multiple knowledge traditions that exist independent of each other and possess different but more or less helpful conceptual tools, methodologies, and theories about the same objects of study. Actually, when a dominant tradition tends to expand out of its home space it does not land

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>68</sup>Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 51-51.

into a void, rather it comes into contact with other ones. Thus, it can be plausibly maintained that as traditions grow out of repetitive communication and interaction internally, at their peripheries and intersecting spaces they communicate and interact with other alternative traditions.

Such interaction of traditions and its bearings on their self-identity can be understood with reference to the interactionism associated with the Chicago School of sociology, especially the strand ascribed to George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) and known as symbolic interactionism. As Mead never wrote at length his ideas in a systematic way, the force of his ideas was felt through his outstanding students some of whom used to take verbatim notes of his lectures which were compiled and published posthumously.<sup>69</sup> Interestingly, though ‘symbolic interactionism’ is linked to the social psychology of Mead but the term was coined by Herbert Blumer<sup>70</sup> who was one of his foremost students. Thus there is some imprecision in the use of terms such as interactionism, symbolic interaction, and Chicago School. In fact, interactionism is a broader approach than symbolic interactionism and not all the scholars associated with the Chicago School profess symbolic interactionism.<sup>71</sup>

Blumer has given a succinct account of symbolic interactionism which also makes clear how it is distinguished from interactionism at large. According to him symbolic interactionism is based on three premises: 1) that human beings act towards things on account of the meanings that, in their view, the things bear for them, 2) the meanings of these things emerge out of the social interaction that human beings mutually exercise, and 3) these meanings are mediated and tailored through an interpretative process brought into play by the persons who are dealing with these things.<sup>72</sup> It is the third premise which distinguishes symbolic interactionism from the general interactionism and which seemingly bears immediate relevance to the present study. Applying this schema to scholarly traditions, an

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<sup>69</sup> See the ‘Preface’ by Charles W. Morris to George Herbert Mead, *MInd, Self, & Society: from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), v-vii.

<sup>70</sup> Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 1: footnote.

<sup>71</sup> Paul Atkinson and William Housley, *Interactionism* (London: SAGE, 2003), 2-3.

<sup>72</sup> Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, 2.

interpretive process modifies the meanings of the subject matters which a scholarly tradition is dealing with. These meanings do not simply belong to the subject matters under study but emerge through mutual interaction of a particular scholarly community. Now it can be that this scholarly community together interacts with other scholarly communities having distinct cultural identities but dealing with the same subject matters. Thus the perceived meanings of subject matters are modified through an interpretive process exercised by the interacting knowledge traditions. Furthermore, since the scholarly traditions are themselves traditions of interpretations, their interaction for that matter implies reciprocity of interpretations.

Mead's theory of self and other can shed light on the reciprocity of this dual interpretive process. For Mead, the self develops out of a process of social engagement and through one's relations to that process and to other individuals. Owing to this social interaction, the self gets a characteristic reflexivity which makes it both subject and object. What differentiates self-consciousness from consciousness is the ability of the self to objectify itself. This objectification which elevates ordinary consciousness to self-consciousness is acquired when an individual sees himself or herself through the eyes of other individuals.<sup>73</sup> The self as subject culminates in 'I' and as object in 'Me'. Both 'I' and 'Me' are two integral aspects of the self-hood.<sup>74</sup> The self-objectification and self-development completes in two stages. The first stage pertains to assuming the attitude of another individual toward oneself. At the second stage one sees oneself through attitudes of all those who make up the interacting community and are a part of an organized social process. Now, the general attitudes of the whole community become an "other" which gives unity to the self. The attitude of the whole community is what Mead calls the 'generalized other'.<sup>75</sup>

The Meadean theory of self which emerges over against a generalized other can explain reciprocity of the interpretations of the scholarly traditions. It supports the dialectical view of self and other construed in this study as 'other within and self without'. However, it needs to be investigated to what extent the interaction of Muslim and Western traditions in

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<sup>73</sup>Mead, *MInd, Self, & Society: from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, 135-38.

<sup>74</sup>Housley, *Interactionism*, 6-7.

<sup>75</sup>Mead, *MInd, Self, & Society: from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, 154.

the study of religion is affecting their self-perception and at the same time perception about the perceived Other.

## **Part 1: The Study of Religion as a Discipline in Muslim and Western Culture**

## **Chapter 2:**

### **2. Religious Studies, Its Disciplinary Identity and the Cultural Other**

Complex quandaries and questions unite and divide scholars attempting to circumscribe the discipline. Comparative frameworks prove useful for understanding religions in globalized world, and even for drawing broad connections among religions in all their diversity. At the same time, postcolonial and postmodern insights problematize comparative studies, exposing the western (and Christian) provenance of the very concept ‘religion’ and underscoring the integrity of each particular religious phenomenon. New developments on the religious scene (such as new spiritualities or recovered histories and traditions) challenge the competency of prevailing methodologies and classification schemes. (Slavica Jakelić & Lori Pearson, 2004)

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## 2.1 The Questions of Origin and Disciplinary Identity

It is generally agreed that the academic study of religion emerged as a systematic discipline in the latter half of the nineteenth century Europe. This self-perception itself goes back to the nineteenth century. As early as 1872, a leading nineteenth century French orientalist Émile-Louis Burnouf (1821–1907) wrote optimistically:

The present century will not expire without having witnessed the entire and comprehensive establishment of a science, whose elements are at this moment still widely scattered, – a science unknown to preceding centuries and undefined, and which we for the first time now call the Science of Religions.<sup>1</sup>

The quotation clearly underscores perceived novelty of the emerging new science, something happening or about to happen for the first time. Similarly the renowned Dutch historian of religions Chantepie de la Saussaye (1818–1874) remarked that “such men as the Indian emperor Akbar or the Islamic Philosopher Averroes cannot be regarded as precursors of religio-historical studies since their comparison of religions was too limited and their interest not scientific enough; only in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the preconditions for the establishment of a real science of religion were given”.<sup>2</sup> Some other writers would even specify the year of inception of the perceived virgin science. This narrowly imagined view of the beginnings is often accompanied by glorification of one or the other figure as father of this science. Usually, Max Müller takes precedence over other contenders like Cornelius P. Tiele.<sup>3</sup> Against this background, Waardenburg rightly

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<sup>1</sup>Émile Louis Burnouf, *La Science des religions* (Paris: 1872; reprint, (Translated) London, 1888), 1. Quoted in Louis Henry Jordon, *Comparative Religion: Its Genesis and Growth* (Edinburg: T. & T. Clark 1905; reprint, Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1986), 23.

<sup>2</sup>Saussaye, *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte*, 2. Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye was a protestant theologian and one of the pioneers of the science of religion. He was the first to use the term ‘phenomenology of religion’. See Gerardus Van der Leeuw. *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology*, translated by J. E. Turner. 2 volumes. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), P. 693 cf. George James, *Interpreting Religion: The Phenomenological Approaches of Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye, W. Brede Kristensen, and Gerardus van der Leeuw*. (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), Pp.42-54

<sup>3</sup>Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 35.

remarks that the emergence of the study of religion passed through a much gradual and complex course, a view which risks to be eclipsed by glorification of this or that figure as the founding father.<sup>4</sup> After all, fathers are the sons of forefathers.

However, at the same time this caution against the narrow view of the beginnings does not mean to discredit the valuable contribution of the pioneers like Müller. To quote Girardot:

While in recent years we have become suspicious of our habitual concern to specify patriarchal progenitors of discursive tradition, Müller was certainly one of the most noted and influential figures associated with the institutionalized emergence of the “science of religion” or “comparative religions” during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, when it comes to putting the development of the study of religion in its historical context, there seems to be a tendency to leap some two millennia back, to the Ancient Greece and Rome. Eric J. Sharpe’s *Comparative Religion: A History* which has acquired the status of a modern classic<sup>6</sup> can be cited here as an example. In the first chapter titled “The Antecedents of Comparative Religion”, immediately after a short introductory paragraph and a brief description of the essential elements for the existence of comparative religion, namely motive, material and method, he goes on to say: “On these criteria, a good case might be made out for tracing the origin of comparative religion back to classical antiquity”<sup>7</sup>, that is, Ancient Greece and Rome. It is no surprise then that the subsequent discussion in the chapter postulates the common Eurocentric periodization which sees the development of whole human civilization having passed through the ancient, medieval, and modern phases.<sup>8</sup> In the context of global history of philosophy, John C. Plott et al has

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<sup>4</sup>Jacques Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: Aims, Methods and Theories of Research: Introduction and Anthology* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999).

<sup>5</sup>N. J. Girardot, "Max Müller's "Sacred Books" and the Nineteenth-Century Production of the Comparative Science of Religions," *History of Religions* 41, no. 3 (2002): 213.

<sup>6</sup> A symposium was held on this book

<sup>7</sup>Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, according to this periodization any new developments occurring after the modern period fall back somehow on one of the obtained periodical units, usually the modern one. This is done by adding

demonstrated how unconvincing this periodization is with regard to the other important civilisations of the world like China and India.<sup>9</sup> The observation applies equally well to the case of antecedents of the study of religion. Between the two extremes, it is maintained here that the emergence of Religionswissenschaft in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was definitely *a turning point but not the starting point*.

As Sharpe himself maintains elsewhere, the history of religious studies needs to be understood taking seriously the lessons learnt from the history of ideas and the sociology of knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Jakelić and Starling put these two dimensions in concrete terms stating that the scholarly study of religion as a distinct subject was an outcome of the broader conditions of modernity and the engagement of Western thinkers with religious otherness.<sup>11</sup> Thus, emergence of academic study of religion needs to be understood both against the background of the intellectual landscape of the nineteenth century Europe as well as in the context of Europe's expansion and coming into contact with other civilization and cultures. The two aspects can also be seen as the internal and external factors, respectively, operative behind the development.

Concerning encounter with religious other, it would be to state the obvious that study of religion implied a sort of interaction with other cultures. It is striking to note that the emergence of *Religionswissenschaft* coincided with the major developments of colonialism. If the chronology of the inception of the discipline set out by Sharpe be taken literally – that

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prefix of "post", or even "post-post" if needed, evading any fundamental deviation from the established tripartite division.

<sup>9</sup>James M. Dolin und Paul D. Mays John C. Plott, "The Problem of Periodization," in *Global History of Philosophy*, ed. John C. Plott (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979), 255-303.

<sup>10</sup>Eric J. Sharpe, "The Secularization of the History of Religions," in *Gilgul: Essays on Transformation, Revolution and Permanence in the History of Religions*, ed. D. Shulman S. Shaked, G.G. Stroumsa, *Studies in the History of Religions (Supplement to Numen)* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 269. Elsewhere, Sharpe has hinted that application of the history of ideas to the history of religious studies is a standing challenge, which however is beyond the scope of the present study.

<sup>11</sup>Slavica Jakelić & Jessica Starling, "Religious Studies: A Bibliographic Essay," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 1 (2006): 194.

is between 1859 and 1869 – then the development took place just two years after the 1857 War of Independence (the Mutiny from the English point of view) which resulted in formal completion of colonisation of India. No doubt the exploration voyages and colonisation had begun since the fifteenth century but at first it largely targeted the newly discovered continents, namely North America, South America, and Australia, or the costal enclaves of the Old World. It was around the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the European powers like Britain and France, and to a lesser degree Italy and Germany, colonised virtually entire Africa and most of Asia. Now, some parts of the colonised Africa and regions of Asia like, South Asia, South West Asia, and South East Asia had been cradles of versatile material as well as higher cultures, including institutionally established and doctrinally profound religions. Against this background, the new religious worlds had come into purview of expanding Europe and the religions of the East were pressing upon the European consciousness. Though at that time the self presumably gazed at the other as a mute object but in fact the others themselves happened to be reflexive subjects. The inter-cultural or inter-civilizational encounters are never one-way traffic. One of the interacting cultures can be at the receiving end but by no way this fact rules out reciprocity of the influences.<sup>12</sup>

Generally speaking, most of these religions had had survived against the political and cultural onslaught from other civilizations. Hinduism had proved its tenaciousness against the indigenously emerging religions like Buddhism and Jainism as well as religions of the conquerors for instance Islam. Buddhism had survived successfully in other parts of the world after virtually complete wash out from its birthplace, India. Islam had managed to remain an important historical force after the fall of its cultural and political capital Baghdad to the Mongols in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the nineteenth century colonisers might have got a run over militarily but the cultural and religious scenario was much more complex in the Old World. It can be instantiated that far from being overwhelmed, the indigenous cultures even

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<sup>12</sup> For an account of reciprocity and mutuality between different cultures in South Asia in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries see Jamal Malik, "Perspectives of Mutual Encounters in South Asian History 1750-1850," in *Berliner studien zur Internationalen Politik und Gesellschaft/Berlin Studies in International Politics and Societies: Band 3: Rising India - Europe's Partner?*, ed. Klaus Voll and Doreen Beierlein, *Berliner studien zur Internationalen Politik und Gesellschaft/Berlin Studies in International Politics and Societies* (Berlin: Weißensee Verlag, 2006). See also, Gail Minault Austin, "Qiran al-Sa'âdain: The Dialogue between Eastern and Western Learning at the Delhi College," in *Perspectives of Mutual Encounters in South Asian Histories 1760-1860*, ed. Jamal Malik (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 260-77.

succeeded to fascinate the European consciousness. The interpretation of ‘Orientalism’ singly in terms of dominance and exploitation misses the other side of the picture. Goethe’s inspiration by classical Persian poet Hāfiz Sherāzī as manifested in his *Der ost-westliche Diwan*, Schopenhauer’s appreciation of the Upanishads as the greatest source of inspiration and enlightenment for generations to come, and most importantly for the present discussion Müller’s fascination by Indian religious and cultural heritage and the role this fact played in moulding his intellectual development can be mentioned as examples. The expansion of Europe was not simply a project of conquest; it was also an opening up.<sup>13</sup>

Understandably, the closed view of the non-Biblical religions under a blanket term of paganism was displaced by recognition of religious plurality – a bedrock presupposition of the enterprise of academic study of religion. Apart from the awareness of the plurality and complexity of the phenomenon of religion, new materials pertinent to the study of religion became available in the nineteenth century. As Kitagawa and Strong note, these materials accumulated from three types of sources: firstly, discovery, carefully study, and translation of the religious texts from around the world; secondly, important archaeological discoveries which shed fresh light on the ancient religious worlds; and finally, the explorations and colonisation of the non-European world provided for the ethnological data on the cultures and religions of Africa, Asia, Australia and Americas.<sup>14</sup> Thus one of the three prerequisites – namely motive, material, and method – viewed by Sharpe for the existence of ‘comparative religion’ was fulfilled to a considerable measure. The issue of motive and method, however, is much more complicated and will be treated below briefly.

The juxtaposition of rich cultures of the world presented a paradox: either to confront or converse. Concerning religion, the lead players tried the both: the missionary movement and the resulting controversies<sup>15</sup> represent the confrontational posture whereas the dialogue

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<sup>13</sup> A brief but compact elaboration on this theme can be found under the subheading “An Oriental Renaissance” in Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, 28-29.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph M. Kitagawa & John S. Strong, “Friedrich Max Müller and the Comparative Study of Religion,” in *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West*, ed. John Clayton Ninian Smart, Patrick Sherry, and Steven T. Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 179-80.

<sup>15</sup> An example of how the missionary activities were countered by the local religious communities is found in Avril Ann Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India* (Surry: Routledge/Curzon, 1993). See also a

of religions and academic study of religion can be viewed as the conversational or understanding stance. In this connection, around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century two significant events proved to be the trend setters for the future course of history: the World's Parliament of Religions convened in Chicago in 1893 and the Congress of the History of Religions held in Paris in 1900. The World's Parliament of Religions was basically motivated towards the theme of unity and cooperation of religions and largely attended by the representatives of different religions. Though some scholars of religions took part in this event but their participation was as representatives of their respective denominations. By stark contrast, the first congress of History of Religions was not a religious gathering as such. It was through and through an academic conference attended by some eminent scholars like Durkheim, Cornelius. P. Tiele and Edward. B. Taylor. Conversely to the case of the World's Parliament of Religions, the participants of the Congress who were clerics like Nathan Söderblom attended this event in their capacity of scholars.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the Parliament proved to be the inception of the movement of dialogue between different religious communities, while the Congress signified an important milestone in the history of academic study of religion.

In a way, the two events reflected the emerging Anglo-American and Continental distinction of approach to the pressing phenomenon of the religions of the world. Apparently, the events signified two different endeavours: dialogue of religions and the academic study of religion. However, afterwards it proved that the distinction extended to the motive behind study of religion(s) itself, the continental scholars mainly advocating the detached scientific research while a good number of Anglo-American scholars willing to accept practical ends like interfaith harmony as a legitimate motive and dialogue as a method in the study of religion. The two approaches point to a difference of attitude toward the religious other, whether to engage with it or to keep it at distance. Needless to say, both attitudes have their peculiar pros and cons for the pursuit of understanding religions.

Let us turn toward the internal factors, the intellectual landscape of the nineteenth century. Apart from the actual encounter with religious other and growing awareness of religious plurality, since a couple of centuries the intellectual ethos had already changed

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helpful review of this book: Christian W. Troll, "New Light on the Christian-Muslim Controversy of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century " *Die Welt des Islams* 34, no. 1 (1994).

<sup>16</sup>Kitagawa, "Humanistic and Theological History of Religions," 198-204.

radically. Renaissance, Reform, Enlightenment, and Romanticism movements had deeply affected the religious understanding of the universe. The push of a steady process of secularization had put the religious commitments and practices under rational scrutiny, thus increasingly compelling religious communities to explain and argue for their respective convictions.<sup>17</sup> Secularization is a controversial concept and various sociologists have viewed host of different elements essential to it, for instance, institutional differentiation or segmentation, autonomization, rationalization, societalization, disenchantment of the world, privatization, generalization, pluralisation, relativization, this-worldliness, individualization, unbelief, and decline of church religiosity.<sup>18</sup> It needs not to be emphasised that virtually all of the above listed tendencies imply, one way or the other, neutralization of religion – at least in the public sphere. Nevertheless, most important for the present discussion is the view of secularization – and modernity in general – as a process of disenchantment of the world that is eliminating the mysteries of natural phenomenon by rationalization and scientific explanations.

In this connection, it seems pertinent to refer to Samuel Preus' book *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud* in which he ventures, using Thomas Kuhn's vocabulary, to trace back the development of a new paradigm for explaining religion. Preus studies nine authors beginning with Jean Bodin (1530 – 1596) to Sigmund Freud (1861–1951), covering a time span of about three centuries, to show how the early modern European theories about the origin of religion culminated in an approach to religion which was informed by naturalistic instead of theological presuppositions. He contends that work of these authors makes a coherent research tradition that was conducive to a new paradigm for studying religion. To avoid misunderstanding Preus prefers to call this paradigm 'naturalistic' instead of 'reductionistic'.<sup>19</sup> With reference to Preus' analysis, Wiebe maintains that this coherent tradition of study of religion was a break away from the previous religio-theological

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<sup>17</sup>Bossey Ecumenical Institute, "Report of Consultation What Difference Does Religious Pluralism Make? ," *Current Dialogue* 34, no. 2 (1999): 55.

<sup>18</sup>Karel Dobbelaere, "Secularization," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, ed. Swatos William H. Jr. (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1998).

<sup>19</sup>Samuel Preus, *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), ix.

approach and that its culmination owes to the Enlightenment critique of religion.<sup>20</sup> In the same vein, Jakelić and Starling have recently endorsed the view that religious studies originated when religion was separated from the totality of social life and defined as a subject of study.<sup>21</sup> According to this construction of the intellectual ethos leading to the emergence of *Religionswissenschaft*, the development is seen as an outcome of a rationalization and secularization which established a differentiation between religion and study of religion. In this light, the self identification of *Religionswissenschaft* clearly emerges over against theological approach to religion which takes for granted certain religious postulates without subjecting them to critical inquiry. Thus the phrase: 'Science of Religion' renders a new science to the detriment of religion rather than a happy marriage of science and religion.

No doubt, there is a grain of truth in the above line of thinking and it will be safe to say that the majority of the scholars assume it explicitly or implicitly. However, an alternative narrative has been offered by scholars like Hans G. Kippenberg,<sup>22</sup> the former president of the IAHR. Drawing on the Hayden White's assertion that there can be no history which is not the philosophy of history at the same time, he traces the connection between religious studies as a historical discipline and the philosophy of religion.<sup>23</sup> Like Preus, Kippenberg too reviews the contribution of the eminent philosophers since the sixteenth century, but to establish his narrative his selection of philosophers is partly different beginning with Thomas Hobbes (1588-1689) instead of Jean Bodin. After succinctly surveying the views of Thomas Hobbes, David Hume (1711-1776), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770- 1831), and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), he shows

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<sup>20</sup>Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy*, 3-6.

<sup>21</sup>Starling, "Religious Studies: A Bibliographic Essay," 195.

<sup>22</sup> His book *Die Entdeckung Der Religionsgeschichte: Religionswissenschaft Und Moderne* (München: CH Beck, 1997), translated into English by Barbara Harshav as *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002) is a ground breaking attempt to make sense of the rise of religious studies vis-à-vis modernity. A symposium was specifically held on this book in the 2001 American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting and its proceedings were published in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 4 (2003).

<sup>23</sup>Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, 1.



how religions were subjected to critical reflection by these philosophers but at the same time seen as comprehensive worldviews and compendiums of human culture which moulded thought, behaviour, and emotions of human beings.<sup>24</sup> Put succinctly by Segal, Kippenbergs's thesis is that "many of the leading modern theorists of religion, far from rejecting religion for science and modernity, saw religion as surviving in modernity, and surviving not as mere relic of an outdated past but as an ongoing aspect of culture that transcended the bounds of science."<sup>25</sup>

Admittedly, this narrative endorses the connection between modernity and religious studies as a subject but it envisions modernity as a complex phenomenon imbued with ambivalences rather than a simple linear process of secularization or disenchantment through rationalization. Here modernity is seen as a self-conscious distancing from the past. However the break with past occurs differently in the domains of scientific knowledge, morality and aesthetics. That is because scientific progress is future oriented and can move on leaving the past behind in the rubric of history whereas in the case of art, morality, and religion such linear development is unconceivable. The separation of these domains, signifying a rift within the present, indicates that modernity does not entail disappearance of religions rather it leads to their reflexive ordering and reordering.<sup>26</sup> Paradoxically, modernity is a break with past yet a continuation of past in present. This is particularly true of the domains of art and religion.

The latent ambivalence of modernity connects to two counterbalancing tendencies pointed out by Mathew Arnold as Hebraism: to act conscientiously and Hellenism: to think impartially. In the history of Western civilization, this pair of terms refers respectively to the Judaeo-Christian tradition with a belief in personal God and to the non-personal ultimate principle of the Greek philosophy. Thus, the historical currents of Hellenism and Hebraism

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>25</sup>Robert A. Segal, "Tylor: A Test Case of Kippenberg's Thesis," in *Religion im kulturellen Diskurs/Religion in Cultural Discourse: Festschrift Für Hans G. Kippenberg Zu Seinem 65. Geburtstag/Essays in Honor of Hans G. Kippenberg on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Brigitte Luchesi & Kocku von Stuckrad (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 17. However, it may be noted that making a case study of Edward Brunnett Tylor (1832-1917), Segal disagrees with Kippenberg's thesis; see p.30.

<sup>26</sup>Kippenberg, "Religious History, Displaced by Modernity," 221-22. Cf. Critical Terms p. 189.

extend into the English ethos of modernization.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, in the German sociological thought, some scholars held that the notions essential to the function of modern institutions like Capitalism, individualism, hard work, and human rights could only be understood in terms of their roots in a particular western cultural history which includes Judaism, Hellenism, Roman culture, and Christianity.<sup>28</sup> Along this line, Ernst Troeltsch has argued in his seminal article entitled “The Significance of Protestantism for the Rise of the Modern World” that the modern world was continuation of the pre-modern one and that particularly the modern phenomenon of individualism had religious roots.<sup>29</sup> In the similar vein, Max Weber traced links between the rise of capitalism and the Puritan Protestantism.<sup>30</sup> Most importantly, Weber argues that science itself was a product of religious history. Science rests on a belief that there are no mysterious or incalculable forces that come into play, a belief which is promoted by certain religions.<sup>31</sup> To put the argument in a nutshell, there is religion in modernity as there is modernity in religion.

Taking the lead from such revaluations of religion and modernity, Kippenberg sees the “Romantic idealization of a unity of spirit and nature”<sup>32</sup> working behind the reordering of religion in the modern world. It is not surprising, then, that for him the rise of religious studies owes to the Romantic critique of the Enlightenment not a culmination of the Enlightenment itself.<sup>33</sup> Two historical facts bring to relief this line of argument. Firstly, the

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, 47-48.

<sup>28</sup> Kippenberg, "Religious History, Displaced by Modernity," 227.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.: 228.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.: 229.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.: 242.

<sup>32</sup> Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> In his own words: “Die Religionswissenschaft war – um im Bilde zu bleiben – eher ein Kind der romantischen Kritik an der Aufklärung als der Aufklärung selber.” Hans G. Kippenberg, "Einleitung: Religionswissenschaft und Kulturkritik," in *Religionswissenschaft und Kulturkritik: Beiträge zur Konferenz The History of Religions and Critique of Culture in the Days of Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950)*, ed. Hans G. Kippenberg & Brigitte Luchesi (Marburg: diagonal-Verlag, 1991), 20.

resurgence of the religions since the last quarter of the twentieth century has placed a question mark on the thesis that modernization necessarily leads to secularization.<sup>34</sup> The speculations that the phenomenon of religion would not survive longer or that its role would be wiped off at least from the public sphere proved to be wrong. Throughout the world, different institutional and non-institutional forms of religiosity have staged a spectacular come back, a ‘divine surprise’<sup>35</sup> indeed. Secondly, the time span of about one century, between the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – the high time of the Enlightenment movement – and the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century cannot be simply brushed aside.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps it is because of this later consideration that Walter H. Capps writes that religious studies emerged with its distinctive methods “during *and following* the period of the Enlightenment.”<sup>37</sup>

What does taking account of the Romanticism over and above the Enlightenment signify? Obviously, it points to the survival of religious roots in modernity on the one hand and the rationalization of religions on the other, a reciprocal appropriation which gave birth to religious studies then known as *Religionswissenschaft*. This point of view contrasts the one which sees the emergence of religious studies one-sidedly out of the rational critique of religion. If the interface of modernity and religion as outlined above is not ill founded then religious studies does not emerge clearly over against religion but it was a reappraising of religion itself. Instead of being a science to the detriment of religion, *religious studies underscored an ambivalent relationship between the scientific progress and pervasiveness of religion, accepting the existential importance of religion but refusing to endorse its claim to ultimate truth.*

Dwelling further on this point, as is well known, Müller had employed the dictum *He who knows one, knows none* to stress the importance of comparative method in the scientific

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<sup>34</sup> The issue of persistence of religion in the face of secularism has claimed scholarly attention. For instance, the 29th Conference of International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR) held recently (on July 23 - 27, 2007 in Leipzig, Germany) was titled: “Secularity and Religious Vitality.”

<sup>35</sup> Andrea Riccardi, "Between Violence and Dialogue: The Religions in the Twentieth Century," *Concilium* 4 (1997): 73.

<sup>36</sup> Kippenberg, "Einleitung: Religionswissenschaft und Kulturkritik," 19-20.

<sup>37</sup> Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*, xi. [Emphasis added]

study of religion. Against the background of the then prevalent notion of natural religion<sup>38</sup>, the dictum can also be taken as alluding to a differentiation between religion as a category in singular and historical religions in plural. Natural religion was an ahistorical concept which meant a universal religiosity underlying the plurality of positive or historical religions. Thus, Müller's dictum implied that study of different historical religions was necessary to unearth the characteristics of natural religion while the historical religions were to be understood as concrete instances of that very natural religion, a circular relationship between understanding of religion and religions.

Such a conceptual framework enabled scholars to transcend the positive historical religions without explicitly refuting them. Framing this ambivalence within the Meadean distinction of 'I' and 'Me' aspects of self can explain the complex relationship of religious studies with historical religions. It can be hypothesized that even though the historical religions were subject matter of religious studies but they did not constitute its disciplinary 'I' rather they counted for its 'generalised other'. However, functioning as the 'generalized other' historical religions let religious studies acquire 'Me' of its disciplinary self.

It is not difficult to surmise that the debate of phenomenological and historical approaches which was at its full swing around the mid-twentieth century connects to the distinction between study of religion and religions.<sup>39</sup> The phenomenological approach is a systematic study of religion as such taking it as a *sui generis* phenomenon that cannot and should not be reduced to other social or psychological factors. On the other hand, the historical approach implies study of positive religions in their historical continuity as well as in interaction with other social or psychological developments and thus opening the doors on psychological, sociological and anthropological methods in the study of religion. What is of importance for the present discussion is the point that phenomenological approach construed religious studies as a coherent and a unified discipline with reference to a theoretical object of study namely religion. However, more than one of the approaches, phenomenology of religion has been functioning as a general paradigm for the study of religions quite until the last quarter of the twentieth century. That is why as the phenomenology of religion came

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<sup>38</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990).

<sup>39</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 8-10 & 29.

under diligent scrutiny, afterwards religious studies is seen by many as facing the crises of disciplinary identity. The historical approach however takes religious phenomenon in a net of connections, both synchronic and diachronic, with past on the one hand and with different social and psychological factors on the other. Thus, religious studies in this framework emerges as a composite field of study entrenched in and relying on different social scientific disciplines and thus internally a diversified enterprise.

Within the historical religions, relationship of Christianity with religious studies presents a special case. Non-Christian religions were simultaneously the disciplinary other of religious studies as well as the cultural other of the broader historical experience of West within which religious studies was embedded, a dual othering for that matter. By contrast, Christianity was simply the disciplinary other of religious studies. One is reminded of the historic statement of Adolf von Harnack in response to Müller's above quoted dictum which the former expressed at the University of Berlin in 1901: "He who does not know this religion knows none, and he who knows it together with its history knows all".<sup>40</sup> While refuting comparative method in favour of Christianity, Harnack did not realize that the superstructure of *Religionswissenschaft* was already constructed on the Christian theological assumptions and methods to a considerable extent. This contention is supported by the fact that *Nathan Söderblom* (1866-1931) was the Archbishop of Uppsala and one of the founders of the ecumenical movement, the Norwegian scholar *W. Brede Kristensen*, the Dutch *phenomenologist of religion* *Gerardus van der Leeuw* (1890-1950), *C.P. Tiele*, and *Saysay* all were theologians.

In this connection, John Milbank's analysis is quite important. He holds that certain developments in the Christian theology helped create the present secular outlook of religious studies. These developments include a) the development of Christian theology itself into a non-theological mode of knowledge which allows reflection while being apart from God, b) and an extension of the first development, the secularization of theology transferring it from the event-of-divine-disclosure to a second-order deliberation on diverse religious data, and c) the coming about of a new conception of the state, especially its relationship with religion,

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<sup>40</sup>Pummer, "Religionswissenschaft or Religiology?," 92.

causing religion to become a private matter but still useful for functioning of the state and maintaining order.<sup>41</sup>

Milbank's view of the emergence of religious studies out of Christian theology might be challenged as totalizing and neglecting the equally compelling narratives based in other religious, ideological or social scientific orientations,<sup>42</sup> but it makes quite clear why religious studies needed to carefully distinguish itself from theology in order to establish its disciplinary identity. The Christian backdrop of the cultural milieu in which religious studies emerged and flourished triggered the debate of relationship between theology and religious studies. Needless to say, theology in this debate is presumably the Christian theology.

As regard the non-Christian religions, especially the living religious traditions, some other issues have been, and continuing to be, more pertinent. One of these issues is the claim of certain believing communities that their religion cannot be understood without participating in their religious experience. A closely related but even more problematic question is that if the believers of a particular religious community refuse to recognize a scholarly work as true description of their faith, how would this affect the scholarly worth of such work? On their part, scholars could argue that their work is not limited to simply compiling the statements of believers rather they analyse, categoriz, compare and theorize on religious data leading to the conclusions which might not be necessarily acceptable or even recognizable for the respective believers. These and the similar questions are known as the problem of insiders' and outsiders' perspectives in the study of religion. Obviously, the notion of insiders and outsiders brings to fore the issue of identity of the scholars and that of the objects of study as well as the nature of relationship which exists between the two.

## **2.2 Internationalization of the Eurocentric Study of Religion**

Before the Second World War, the issue of different cultural perspectives in the study of religion did not gain full attention of the theorists and historians of the discipline. It was seldom realized that the "theologies" of the living religious traditions of the world themselves offered systemic descriptions of their respective religious experiences and convictions, and

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<sup>41</sup>Slavica Jakelić & Lori Pearson, ed., *The Future of the Study of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 7.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 7-8.

sometime also about their religious others. It appears that before the Second World War the theoretical tensions, like the debate of historical and phenomenological approaches, were mainly arising from within the discipline. Thereafter the phenomenon of globalization and the resultant rift between local and global structures gradually introduced new challenges for religious studies. The source of these challenges and the scope of the proposed solutions go well beyond the parameters of any single academic discipline, let alone religious studies. The point stands in need of some detailing.

Thanks to the means of communication, the 'globe-ness' of earth has become an immediate human experience over and above a scientific fact. The effects of this phenomenon for human civilization are so enormous as if we are passing through another axial age.<sup>43</sup> The first axial age is believed to mark a transition from mythical consciousness to the objectification of what exists out there and from tribal consciousness to a realization of individual self. The phenomenon of globalization, in turn, marks a transition from national and/or ideological self identification to an ever increasing awareness of the universal human community. Since the mid-twentieth century, it has become obvious that henceforth whatever the human beings engage in anywhere in the world it is bound to have repercussions across the globe. Thus, the emergence of the United Nations Organization (UNO) after two world wars was a culmination of the human condition which had already started manifesting itself awkwardly in the form of *world* wars.

The mid-twentieth century did not witness only emergence of UNO as a global institution but along with it, and mostly under its auspices, a number of social, cultural, and economic bodies came into being one after another envisioning the entire globe as sphere of their activities. It is in this context that the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR)<sup>44</sup> was founded in September 1950 providing the academic study of religion a global forum. In a way, the appearance of the IAHR marked an end to the classical period of the academic study of religion.<sup>45</sup> Organizationally, the IAHR became a member of the

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<sup>43</sup>Leonard Swidler, "The Age of Global Dialogue," *Marburg Journal of Religion* 1, no. 2 (1996): 1.

<sup>44</sup> Initially, it was called the International Association for the Study of History of Religions (I.A.S.H.R.).

<sup>45</sup>Jacques Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: Aims, Methods and Theories of Research*, ed. Jacques Waardenburg, vol. 1, Religion and Reason (The Hague: Mouton, 1973).

UNESCO committee called *International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies* (CIPSH). The preamble of constitution of the CIPSH states that “a detailed comparative study of civilizations will show the wealth and dignity of each national culture and in consequence, its right to universal respect”.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, the article one of the statutes of the IAHR declares aim of the organization “to promote the study of history of religions through the international collaboration of all those whose scientific interests lie in this field”.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the discipline of religious studies was dragged into a sort of internationalism because of the changing geopolitical scenario. However, it is doubtful if a well thought of model for intercultural engagement existed when the IAHR came into being.

The foundation of the IAHR can be understood well as a continuation of the Paris Congress held in 1900. Since then five more academic congresses of the students of religion took place before and after the First World War sequentially at Basel (1904), Oxford (1908), Leiden (1912), Lund (1929), and Brussels (1935). The members of each congress used to nominate the organizing committee for the next congress. After the Second World War, the Dutch society of the students of the History of Religions invited the seventh congress in which the permanent organization of the IAHR was created with proposed statutes and offices. All the nine members of the Executive Board were European scholars with only one exception, who was from the United States.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that the IAHR emerged as a Eurocentric body in spite of the desire to promote collaborative study of religion around the globe.

The fact that the IAHR did not possess a clear model of participation and representation of the cultural heritage of non-Western civilizations while globalizing the study of religion became discernable at the Congress 1958 held in Tokyo. This was the first congress of the IAHR to be held out of Europe and it included a symposium sponsored by the UNESCO specifically focussing on “Religion and Thought in the Orient and Occident”. One of the striking results of this congress was realization of differences between the eastern and western participants on the nature and motive of the study of religion as well as the *raison*

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<sup>46</sup><http://www.cipsh.org/htm/present2bis.htm>

<sup>47</sup>“Bulletin: The International Association for the Study of History of Religions (I.A.S.H.R.),” *Numen* 1 (1954): 87.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*: 86-87.



*d'être* of the IAHR.<sup>49</sup> Among the concerns of the eastern scholars had been that the History of Religions does not deal with questions of the truth and absolute value of religion.<sup>50</sup> The IAHR veterans like Professor Zwi Werblowsky ascribed the concerns of the eastern scholars to misunderstanding on the subject, lack of acquaintance with European scholarship, and incomplete secularisation of the eastern societies.<sup>51</sup> And that the East “could not, in its approach to humanistic studies, make up for the absence, as an imminent growth, of the decisive cultural phenomenon known in European history as the “Enlightenment”.”<sup>52</sup> However, in spite of the quick rejection which the dissenting voices at the Tokyo congress earned they can be considered as the earliest attempt to draw attention to different cultural contexts of and perspectives on religious studies.

Against the background of budding new rifts which resulted after first direct encounter of the Eurocentric religious studies with other scholarly traditions, the IAHR convened its next congress at Marburg in 1960. At this congress, Professor Werblowsky presented an important paper which contained the statement of “basic minimum conditions for the study of the history of religions”. A number of scholars with different methodological and ideological persuasions present at the occasion endorsed the essential tenor<sup>53</sup> of the

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<sup>49</sup>R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Bulletin: the 9th International Congress for the History of Religions, Tokyo, 1958," *Numen* 5 (1958): 234-35.

<sup>50</sup>Pummer, "Religionswissenschaft or Religiology?," 97.

<sup>51</sup>R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Marburg- And After?," *Numen* 7 (1960): 219.

<sup>52</sup>Werblowsky, "Bulletin: the 9th International Congress for the History of Religions, Tokyo, 1958," 234.

<sup>53</sup>However, the individual scholars might have different understanding of these and similar principles. For instance, Professor E. O. James, one of the signatories of the statement, had written a few year before in the first volume of the *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* (the organ of the IAHR): “[W]hile the historical and comparative study of religion is committed to a strictly scientific approach to its material, it cannot exercise its proper function in complete isolation from the closely allied departments of knowledge, and least of all from theology...Religion is essentially a human reaction to the ultimate facts and meaning of life, and constitutes a living reality for those who accept its premises and presuppositions. To regard it merely a branch of Anthropology or Sociology, and still less of Psychology, would be to fail to recognise its true significance as human discipline.” E.O. James, "The History, Science and Comparative Study of Religion" *Numen* 1 (1954): 104. He further states that the study of religion “demands both a historical and scientific approach and a theological and philosophical evaluation, if it is to be understood in its essential nature and

statement and signed it. In view of the immediate relevance to the present discussion, the first two of the five principle statements are quoted below verbatim:

1. Although the *religionswissenschaftliche* method is undoubtedly a Western creation, the qualification of the diametrically opposed method of studying religions as “occidental” and “oriental” respectively is – to say the least – misleading. There are *Religionswissenschaftler* in the East as there are “intuitionists” in the West. The understanding (*Verstehen*) of structures and configurations, *Ganzheitsschau* and even *Wesensschau* have for long formed a major part of or – at least – a major problem of the Humanities. It is therefore an overstatement to say that the East wants to grasp the whole, whilst Western scholarship is concerned with philological, archaeological, etc. detail and historical segments only. “Comparative Religion” is a well-recognized scientific discipline whose methodology may still be in great need of further elaboration, but whose aim is clearly a better understanding of the nature of the variety and historic individuality of religion, whilst remaining constantly alert to the possibility of *scientifically* legitimate generalizations, concerning the nature and function of religion.”

2. *Religionswissenschaft* understands itself as a branch of humanities. It is an anthropological discipline, studying religious phenomenon as a creation, feature, and aspect of human culture. The common ground on which students of religion *qua* students of religion meet is the realization that the awareness of the numinous or the experience of transcendence (where these happen to exist in religions) are – whatever else they may be – undoubtedly empirical facts of human existence and history, to be studied like all human facts, by the appropriate methods. Thus also the value-systems of the various religions, forming an essential part of the factual, empirical phenomenon, are legitimate objects of our studies. On the other hand the discussion of the absolute value of religion is excluded by definition, although it may have its legitimate place in other, completely independent disciplines such as e.g. theology and philosophy of religion.<sup>54</sup>

It is discernable that the disciplinary identity of religious studies is being established here over against two types of the other. The first statement seeks to construct the disciplinary

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ever-developing content, and its foundations are to be well and truly laid.” James, “The History, Science and Comparative Study of Religion

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<sup>54</sup>Annemarie Schimmel, “Summary of the Discussion,” *Numen* 7, no. 2 (1960): 236-37.

self of religious studies in contrast with the *other without*, namely any method different from that developed in the West. The second principle asserts the self identity over against other forms of inquiry about religions like theology and philosophy of religion, which can be seen as the *other within*. At their face value, the statements do not leave any space for recognition of indigenous knowledge traditions developed in different civilizations of the world, which might well include the study of religion albeit with different methodological orientations. Thus, one may conclude that the international collaboration envisioned in the first article of the statutes of the IAHR quoted above at that time meant more or less transplantation of the of Western tradition of the study of religion to the rest of the world.

The endeavour of scholarly study of religion is assumed here to be a coherent discipline qualified with a universal scientific method not significantly conditioned by cultural differences. However, the statements give no clear clue as to what exactly the religio-scientific method is? Instead of an elaboration of the methodology they appear to be a critique of certain perceived misperceptions about the nature of the academic study of religion which had been noted at the Tokyo Congress.

### **2.3 Towards Cross-Cultural Religious Studies? New Horizons, New Challenges**

Nonetheless, the cogency of idealized and homogenized view of the religio-scientific method was called into question in the following decades, especially after the 1980s, at a much deeper level than it had been at Tokyo Congress. It was gradually realized how significantly the cultural perspective of a scholar could affect the undertaking of study and research. The issue of (mis)representation of the oppressed social groups, marginalized classes and gender, and colonized cultures became more and more pressing. Such concerns crystallized in the feminist movement, post-colonial discourse and the critique of Orientalism.<sup>55</sup> The analysis of power structures operative behind construction of knowledge emerged as one of the major

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<sup>55</sup>Armin W. Geertz, "Global perspectives on methodology in the study of religion," in *Perspectives on Method and Theory in the Study of Religions: Adjunct Proceedings of the XVIIth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Mexico City, 1995*, ed. Armin W. Geertz and Russell T. McCutcheon (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 49.

academic perspectives, thanks to theorists like Michel Foucault.<sup>56</sup> Broadly speaking, the whole disciplinary landscape which emerged after the Enlightenment came under attack. Resultantly, such critical perspectives created an across the disciplines awareness about the impact of identity and location of scholars on their choice of topics, methodological preferences, and epistemological presuppositions on the one hand and that of the empirical historical contexts of the subject matters on the other. The methodological implication of the changing *Zeitgeist* culminated in a realization that subjecting other cultures to some theoretical framework from above according to the convenience of the researcher is more likely to eclipse the historical reality instead of illuminating it.

For the enterprise of religious studies these and the similar developments meant that the students of religion no more enjoyed immunity from scrutiny of not only their theories and methods but also their epistemological assumptions and the embedded cultural contexts of their studies. It also became increasingly clear that methodology can turn from tool to trap if the scholar's identity, personal interests, and biases become tangled up with supposedly neutral scholarly methods<sup>57</sup> and that the posture of assumed complete objectivity and detachment can be misleading.<sup>58</sup> The resultant discourse conceives religious studies as a multifarious and developing project amidst cognitive limitations imposed by the historical situation and cultural contingencies. More the same, it implies a greater sensitivity toward the hitherto unheard voices of the subjugated cultures and marginal social groups.

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<sup>56</sup> See for instance Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982). Compare Ivan Strenski, "Religion, Power, and Final Foucault," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66, no. 2 (1998).

<sup>57</sup> Rita M. Gross, "Methodology - Tool or trap? Comments from a Feminist Perspective," in *How to do Comparative Religion?: Three Ways, Many Goals*, ed. René Gothóni (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 154.

<sup>58</sup> Don Wiebe, "History or Mythistory in the Study of Religion?," in *Marburg Revisited: Institutions and Strategies in the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Pye (Marburg: diagonal-Verlag, 1989), 36-42. In this connection, René Gothóni rightly points out that the student of religion is somehow intertwined in the dialectics of involvement and detachment. Compare René Gothóni, "Principles of Studying Religions," *Temenos* 31 (1995): 50. Another interesting work on this topic is *The Myth of Religious Neutrality: An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005). Also compare Gavin D'Costa, "Whose Objectivity? Which Neutrality? The Doomed Quest for a Neutral Vantage Point from which to Judge Religions," *Religious Studies* 29 (1993): 79-95.

For instance, tracking along the series *Religion and Reason* initiated by Jacques Waardenburg in 1971 shows how the concept of different contexts and perspectives of study of religion surfaces gradually. The series includes three extensive chronicles of the study of religion, each comprising two volumes. *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*,<sup>59</sup> takes stock of different approaches from 1870s to 1945 that is to the end of the Second World War, *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion*,<sup>60</sup> carries the survey onwards until early 1980s and the *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*,<sup>61</sup> makes up a sequel to the two previous works covering more than two decades following 1980. In the original addition of his *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*, Waardenburg virtually completely evades the treatment of how scholars' perspective or the particular regional or historical context determines the choices of subject matter and the methodologies to analyse it. Though this dimension gets clear recognition in the new preface to the paperback edition which appeared in 1999, where acknowledging the Eurocentric nature of the classical approaches to religions he writes:

One should acknowledge the fact that both the classificatory and the interpretive "classical" categories of the scholarly study of religion were coined in Europe at a time when Europeans looked at the religion of mankind in very particular ways. It should also be realized that Europeans, and not people of the cultures concerned, elaborated what was considered knowledge of mankind's spiritual life....If one were in a bitter mood, one might say that the existence of these Others allowed Europeans to build their Scholarship, their encompassing Theories, and their World Views over the Others' heads.<sup>62</sup>

Then he points out the need for new interdisciplinary and intercultural approaches particularly as far as the study of living religious tradition is concerned. By interdisciplinary

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<sup>59</sup>Jacques Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: Aims, Methods and Theories of Research*, ed. Jacques Waardenburg, 2 vols., Religion and Reason (The Hague: Mouton, 1973).

<sup>60</sup>Frank Whaling, ed., *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion*, 2 vols., Religion and Reason (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1983), 12-13.

<sup>61</sup>Armin W. Geertz, Peter Antes, Randi R. Warne, ed., *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*, 2 vols., Religion and Reason (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter Inc, 2004).

<sup>62</sup> Compare Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: Aims, Methods and Theories of Research: Introduction and Anthology*, xiii.

and intercultural approaches he means that “researchers with a background not only of different scholarly approaches but also of different social, cultural and spiritual traditions may work together.”<sup>63</sup>

However, Frank Whaling had preceded him envisioning such a shift in his edited *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion* in which he points out the implications of the western nature of research in the field and notes the rising involvement of interreligious dialogue and non-western scholarship. Especially to mention his own authored chapter entitled: “The Study of Religion in a Global Context” he considers the possibility as to “[H]ow can western scholars and scholars from other cultures authentically represent and transmit a mutually verifiable knowledge of the various religions of the world while at the same time recognizing that they are part of wider whole, namely humanity?”<sup>64</sup> For him the first step towards this direction is to allow other cultures and religions to free themselves from western stereotypes; the second being to conceptualize the global unity lying behind the religious diversity. According to him, previously the global unity was imposed by the western stereotypes; now it must be inter-culturally conceptualized.<sup>65</sup> With such an objective in mind, he undertakes a survey of contributions made by six non-western scholars to the scholarly study of religion and ventures to figure out the theoretical implications of their work. All of the selected scholars come from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds. At the end, he arrives at an important conclusion that their work differs from historically-oriented western scholarship on academic and cultural grounds contrary to the widespread thesis of Edward Said which prioritize the imperialistic motives as to be the most decisive factor.<sup>66</sup>

The latest follow-up of these chronicles namely *New Approaches to the Study of Religion* moves a step further toward the intercultural scholarship. The first of the two volumes devotes a complete section comprising an introduction and six chapters to survey the approaches religion in various parts of the world. More than this, the scholars with different

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid., xvi.

<sup>64</sup>Frank Whaling, "The Study of Religion in a Global Context," in *Theory and Method in Religious Studies*, ed. Frank Whaling (Berlin: Mouton, 1995), 197.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 230.

cultural backgrounds are given chance to present a variety of perspectives on the study of religion in their respective regions and cultural spaces. Of special relevance to the present undertaking are two chapters contributed by the Muslim authors. The first chapter analyzes different approaches to religion in Turkey<sup>67</sup> while the other discusses the situation in the Arab world.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, it appears that a handful of scholars have shifted their stance from approaching other cultures just as raw material for their theory to taking them as a source of theory, a shift from simply ‘thinking *of* the others to thinking *with* them.’<sup>69</sup> In this connection, a contemporary scholar Cabezón maintains that although by and large religious studies continues to remain rooted in the Western theoretical schema but there seems some development in the direction of ‘theory pluralism’.<sup>70</sup> The recognition of the religious diversity already lies at the heart of religious studies. A genuine move in the direction of theory pluralism implies a twofold plurality: the plurality of the subject matters and plurality of the reflexive subjects. The second recognition means that far from being mute objects, the indigenous traditions can themselves be imbued with theoretical insights not only about their own cultures but also about their respective others. Along this line, another scholar suggests that the field of religious studies should embrace all the world’s religions not only as subject matter, but also as representing scholarly traditions.

At an institutional level, the American Academy of Religion’s (AAR) declares in its mission statement: “Within a context of free inquiry and critical examination, the Academy welcomes all disciplined reflection on religion—both from within and outside of communities

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<sup>67</sup>Bülent Şenay, "The Study of Religion, the History of Religions and Islamic Studies in Turkey: Approaches from "Phenomenological Theology" to Contextualism," in *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Armin W. Geertz, Peter Antes, Randi R. Warne, *Religion and Reason* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter Inc, 2004).

<sup>68</sup>Abdulkader Tayob, "The Study of Religion and Social Crises: Arab-Islamic Discourse in Late Twentieth Century," in *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Armin W. Geertz, Peter Antes, Randi R. Warne, *Religion and Reason* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter Inc, 2004).

<sup>69</sup>José Ignacio Cabezón, "The Discipline and Its Other: The Dialectic of Alterity in the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 1 (2006): 30-31.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*: 31.

of belief and practice—and seeks to enhance its broad public understanding”.<sup>71</sup> Clearly the AAR’s mission statement is at variance with the IAHR’s “basic minimum conditions for the study of the history of religions.” However, since 1980s different congresses and conferences of the IAHR, too, show signs of a transition giving agency to the hitherto represented cultures. The shift becomes noticeable with the special conference of the IAHR convened in Marburg in 1988.<sup>72</sup> The Proceedings of the regional conference held in Harare in 1992 put the study of religion in the specific African contexts.<sup>73</sup> The 17<sup>th</sup> International Congress of the IAHR was held in Mexico City in 1995 with special focus on different regional and global perspectives in the study of religion.<sup>74</sup> Again the nature of interface between research and dialogue in the context of Christian-Muslim relations in Africa gained considerable attention at the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress of the IAHR held in 2000, in Dublin. The proceedings of a special conference held in Brno in 1999 appeared as *The Academic Study of Religion during the Cold War: East and West*<sup>75</sup> and deal with the impact of cold war situation on the study of religion in particular regional and ideological contexts.

This brief chronological survey shows a particular development in the direction of ‘global perspectives’ on, and the ‘regional contexts’ of, the study of religion. In technical terms, the development is twofold. On the one hand, it signifies taking into account particular historical, political, institutional and cultural background in which the subject matters under study are embodied and thus trying to avert the ahistorical abstract conceptual constructs which often round up the important intricacies of empirical historical realities. On the other hand, it implies asking about the identity and location of the scholar which

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<sup>71</sup>"Mission Statement," The American Academy of Religion, [http://www.aarweb.org/About\\_AAR/Mission\\_Statement/default.asp](http://www.aarweb.org/About_AAR/Mission_Statement/default.asp).

<sup>72</sup>The import of this conference is discussed below.

<sup>73</sup>James Cox and Jacob Olupona Jan Platvoet, ed., *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present and Prospects. Proceedings of the Regional Conference of the International Association for the History of Religions, Harare, Zimbabwe 1992* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

<sup>74</sup>Geertz, "Global perspectives on methodology in the study of religion," 49-73.

<sup>75</sup>Luther H. Martin Iva Doležalová, & Dalibor Papoušek, ed., *The Academic Study of Religion During the Cold War: East and West, Toronto Studies in Religion* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).



determine his or her perspective on the subject matters. It is observed that generally the terms ‘context’ and ‘perspective’ are often loosely used with overlapping connotation. However, a subtle distinction can be seen between the two terms. The ‘context’ relates to the location of the subject matter whereas the ‘perspective’ refers to the mental space of the scholar studying it. Obviously, the notion of perspectives and contexts casts a shadow on the plausibility of a supposedly universal religio-scientific method. It is not surprising, then, that some scholars clearly confront the idea that the study of religion can reach its coherence “by virtue of a canon of methods.”<sup>76</sup>

On the other hand, a great number of theorists continue to uphold a homogenized view of religious studies qualified with certain defining method(s) or unifying principles which are not significantly contingent on cultural differences. On this view, there is a single identifiable enterprise known in the name of religious studies. Contribution of multiple knowledge traditions rooted in different cultural backgrounds to religious studies is permissible however that is seen optimal essentially by the way of adopting it as it is. Thus, in effect the Western academic tradition gets standardized along which the other scholarly traditions are supposed to align themselves with.

Such a stance is clearly visible in what may be called ‘the legacy of Marburg’ which goes back to 1960 with the above quoted statement of the basic principles for the study of religion and Zwi Werblowsky’s seminal article entitled “Marburg and After?”<sup>77</sup> Thereafter, Prof. Michael Pye steadily carried this legacy onwards. Based at the Marburg University, he emerged as one of the key figures who resolutely professed the essential message of the IAHR principles. Firstly, addressing the problem of method, he proposed taxonomy of different approaches to religion which allowed a universally applicable phenomenological study of religion.<sup>78</sup> More importantly, he discovered that already in the eighteenth century, a tradition of critical, comparative, and historical study of religion existed in Japan independent

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<sup>76</sup>Pearson, ed., *The Future of the Study of Religion*, 9.

<sup>77</sup>Werblowsky, "Marburg- And After?." It may be noted that the statement of the basic minimum conditions was also formulated by Werblowsky.

<sup>78</sup>Michael Pye, "Problems of Method in the Interpretation of Religion," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 1, no. 2-3 (1974).

of the developments in Europe. This fact could have drawn him toward the idea of multiple knowledge traditions of religious studies but for Pye it signified quite the contrary, the universality of the scientific study of religion. The notion of scientific study of religion itself remained homogenous.<sup>79</sup> Again this approach underlines an article " 'The Common Ground on Which Students of Religion Meet': Methodology and Theory within the IAHR," which appeared in the *Marburg Journal of Religion* around the end of the twentieth century.<sup>80</sup> The catchphrase of the title is taken from the IAHR's "basic minimum conditions for the study of the history of religions". And quite recently, Pye reiterates the contention that religious studies is a coherent worldwide discipline,<sup>81</sup> an indication that the legacy of Marburg still perpetuates.

Interestingly enough, it was also at Marburg that a special conference convened in 1988 to address the issues of institutional and ideological constraints on religious studies in different parts of the world. And as the title of the published proceedings namely *Marburg Revisited* suggests, in a way this special conference was a revisitation of the 1960 congress.<sup>82</sup> Key delegates of the conference like Annemarie Schimmel, Ugo Bianchi, Zwi Werblowsky, Lauri Honko and Kurt Rudolph had already attended the 1960 congress. Somewhat departing from the totalizing overture of the so-called five principles of the IAHR, a number of theoretical papers sought to contextualize the study of religion.<sup>83</sup> One section of the short

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<sup>79</sup>Pye, "Westernism Unmasked," 224.

<sup>80</sup>Russell T. McCutcheon, "'The Common Ground on Which Students of Religion Meet': Methodology and Theory Within the IAHR," *Marburg Journal of Religion* 1, no. 2 (1996), <http://web.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/mjr/mccutcheon.html>.

<sup>81</sup>Michael Pye, "Difference and Coherence in the Worldwide Study of Religion," in *The Future of the Study of Religion*, ed. Slavica Jakelić & Lori Pearson (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 8.

<sup>82</sup>Michael Pye, *Marburg Revisited: Institutions and Strategies in the Study of Religion* (Marburg: diagonal-Verlag, 1989).

<sup>83</sup> For instance see Thomas Lawson, "Fundamental problem in the world-wide pursuit of the study of religion," in *Marburg Revisited: Institutions and Strategies in the study of religion*, ed. Michael Pye (Marburg: diagonal-Verlag, 1989), Michael Pye, "Cultural and Organizational Perspectives in the Study of Religion," in *Marburg Revisited: Institutions and Strategies in the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Pye (Marburg: diagonal-Verlag, 1989).

volume of conference proceedings discusses religious studies in the contexts of Catholic, Jewish and Protestant cultures. Another section addresses the specific problems arising with regard to the study of religion in Africa, the Muslim world, and China. Thus, *Marburg Revisited* already indicated the growing consciousness as to how contingent the study of religion on specific historical and cultural situation can be. However referring to the distinction of contexts and perspectives made above, the *Marburg Revisited* was an attempt primarily to take into account the contexts of the subject matters rather than different academic perspective on the very nature of study of religion. The plurality of the indigenous knowledge traditions embedded in different epistemological assumptions was not clearly endorsed.

Viewing the whole development after the mid-twentieth century from another angle, the pressing phenomenon of globalization ruled out the isolated and privileged pockets of knowledge making scholarly inquiries interactive and thereby challenging the conventional concepts of discipline and scholarship.<sup>84</sup> A dialectics of global and local surfaced. The push of globalization led towards universalism and homogeneity whereas the local resistance patterns pressed for the recognition of diversity and heterogeneity. Such dialectics of global and local structures develops into an ambivalence that sought to confront the global but at the same time somehow transcend the local. The resultant phenomenon is sometimes called glocalization. The study of religion after the mid-twentieth century reflects one way or the other, this tension between the local and global structures. Thus, it can be viewed that the universalized identity of the enterprise of religious studies was confronted with particular local resistance patterns. As a result, the importance of different regional and institutional contexts of religious studies became recognized as a whole.

However, as far as the plurality of academic, religious, and cultural perspectives, are concerned, the issue is quite complex and problematic. The dilemma is how can multiple knowledge traditions be transcended without being negated? Putting it conversely, how to recognize the contribution of different civilizations in the study of religion without regressing to a banal confessionalism? Another complication involved in the engagement of the Western religious studies with the autochthonic knowledge traditions is that the power relationship makes the former ‘*the*’, not ‘*a*’ type of religious studies. Referring to the concept of

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<sup>84</sup>Bryan S. Turner, "Globalization and the Future of Study of Religion," in *The Future of the Study of Religion*, ed. Slavica Jakelić & Lori Pearson (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 134.

hermeneutical circle, an indigenous knowledge tradition in contact with religious studies is likely to find itself in a part-part as well as part-whole relationship.

Today, when a scholar with the Western background speaks or writes about the Muslim study of other religions, his or her standpoint depends significantly on how s/he perceives the discipline of religious studies itself.

## **Chapter 3:**

### **3. The Dialectics of Self and Other in the Muslim Tradition of Study of Religions**

If such an author is not alive to the requirements of a strictly scientific method, he will procure some superficial information which will satisfy neither the adherent(s) of the doctrine in question nor those who really know it....If, on the contrary, an author has the right method, he will do his utmost to deduce the tenets of a sect from their legendary lore, things which people tell him, pleasant enough to listen to, but which he could never dream of taking for true or believing [in them]. (Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī, 1910: 4)

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During the last three decades, those Muslim scholars who, for long, were relegated to the status of mere historians, heresiographers, or theologians by the Orientalists are being studied as the forerunners of the contemporary discipline – comparative study of religions. (Ghulam Haider Aasi, 1999: 33)

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### 3.1 Study of Religions in the Muslim History: Some Distinctions

The Muslim literary tradition has been credited by some independent scholars for pioneering the comparative study of religion(s) during its hey days.<sup>1</sup> A vast majority of the Muslim academicians, nevertheless, consider it something like an established fact and take pride in substantiating this claim. A brief survey of the recent studies on this literary tradition and the appellations used to denote it can be revealing. Maḥmūd ‘Alī Ḥimāyah who had been a professor at the oldest seat of learning in the Muslim world al-Azhar University, calls this tradition ‘the science of comparative religions’ (*‘ilm muqāranat al-adyān*). He writes:

The science of comparative religions emerged in the history of Islamic thought following the method of the Glorious Qur’ān in its discussion of the previous religions, be they true or false.

We have noticed how our earlier scholars showed interest in this science and wrote several books to describe various denominations which differ from Islam.<sup>1</sup>

Muḥammad Khalīfah Ḥasan Khalīfah who has been the vice-president of the International Islamic University Islamabad maintains: “The voluminous contributions of the medieval period to the study of religion(s) established this study as an independent science for the first time.”<sup>2</sup> He has written a doctoral dissertation for the Temple University on the theme of medieval Jewish-Muslim contribution to the academic study of religion. As the title of his dissertation is suggestive, he refers to this tradition as ‘the academic study of religions’, and considers it a part of the history of *Religionswissenschaft* and freely uses the contemporary terminology like phenomenology of religion, eidetic vision, *épôché* and so on to describe its tenets.

At least three authors use the expression ‘early Muslim scholarship in *Religionswissenschaft*.’ The first one is a Malaysian academician Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman who uses this expression in connection with the contributions of Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (362/973–443/1048).<sup>3</sup> The other two authors use the term *Religionswissenschaft* with

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<sup>1</sup>Ḥimāyah, *Ibn Ḥazm wa-Manhajuhu fī Dirāsāt al-Adyān (Ibn Ḥazm and His Methodology in the Study of Religions)*, 4-5.

<sup>2</sup>Khalīfah, "Medieval Jewish-Muslim contribution to the Academic Study of Religion: A Study of the Methodology of Saadia Al Fayyūmī and Muḥammad Al Shahrastānī", 23.

<sup>3</sup>Kamaruzaman, *Early Muslim Scholarship in Religionswissenschaft*.

reference to the work of ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (479/1086–553/1153) in the title of a book section.<sup>4</sup> Apparently, the term is taken here in generic sense meaning comparative study of religions rather than the particular approach to religion which surfaced in Western Europe during the latter half of the nineteenth century with this label. Two other articles by Kamaruzaman support this inference, one of which refers to the work of al-Bīrūnī using the term *Religionswissenschaft* while the other substitutes it with ‘Comparative Religion’ in the same context.<sup>5</sup>

Another set of studies endeavours to elucidate the characteristics and methodologies of the classical Muslim studies on other religions. Muḥammad ‘Abdullāh Drāz (1312/1894–1378/1958) – one of the most widely known Arab authors on the subject – maintains that the Muslim scholars “derived their descriptions from trustworthy and original sources and so they developed it into an independent science, they gave it a sound scientific method....They have the credit of establishing it as an independent science, ten centuries before the modern Europe did the same.”<sup>6</sup> An interesting but somewhat simplistic comparison of the methodologies of Abū al-Ḥasan al-‘Āmirī (300/912–381/992) and al-Bīrūnī with those of Mircea Eliade (1907–1987) and Joachim Wach (1898–1955) is found in ‘Isa Muhammad Maishanu’s doctoral thesis which he wrote for the International Islamic University

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<sup>4</sup>Muhammad Azizan Sabjan and Noor Shakirah Mat Akhir, "Early Muslim Scholarship in Religionswissenschaft: A Study of Muhammad ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī’s Development of the Concept of The People of a Dubious Book (Ahl Shubhat Kitāb)," in *Islam: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Jaffary Awang Ahmad Sunawari Long, Kamaruddin Salleh (Bangi, Selangor: Department of Theology and Philosophy, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2004).

<sup>5</sup>Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman, "Towards Forming an Islamic Methodology of Religionswissenschaft: The Case of al-Bīrūnī," *Al-Shajarah: Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC)* 3, no. 3 (1998). Cf. Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman, "Al-Bīrūnī: Father of Comparative Religion," *Intellectual Discourse* 11, no. 2 (2003). It may be noted that in a recent German work, too, the expression ‘*Birunis Religionswissenschaft*’ occurs. See Klein, *Abu Reyhan Biruni und die Religionen. Eine interkulturelle Perspektive*, 54.

<sup>6</sup>Muḥammad ‘Abdullāh Drāz, *Al-Dīn: Buhūth Mumhhidah li Dirāsāt Tārīkh al-Adyān (Religion: The Fundamental Questions in the Study of History of Religions)* (Kuwait: Dār al-Qalam, 1970), 21-22. Quoted in English translation by Khalīfah, "Medieval Jewish-Muslim contribution to the Academic Study of Religion: A Study of the Methodology of Saadia Al Fayyūmī and Muḥammad Al Shahrastānī", 23.

Islamabad.<sup>7</sup> A much more profound exposition of the sources, methodologies and overall worth of the classical Muslim scholarship is found in the article titled "Min Manāhij 'Ulamā' al-Muṣimīn fī Dirāsāt al-Adyān (Some Methods of the Muslim Scholars in Study of Religions) by Dīn Muḥammad<sup>8</sup> presently based at the University of Qatar.

However, before delving into technical matters such as the characteristics of the Muslim tradition of study of religions it seems pertinent to enquire, what precisely the epithets like '*Religionswissenschaft*', 'the academic study of religion', 'the science of comparative study of religions', 'phenomenology of religion' etcetera, render when they are applied to a body of literature which appeared around one thousand years before? And most importantly, the writers who opt to refer to the classical Muslim heritage with such appellations, do they indeed endorse the approaches which these 'western' constructions imply? These and similar questions become pressing when considered against the fact that a good number of Muslim intellectuals have expressed their dissatisfaction over the religious studies' approaches and have questioned the utility of its methodologies for understanding religion(s).<sup>9</sup> Understandably, the criticism is severer when it comes down to the application of religious studies' approaches to Islam. To instantiate this point, let us consider the conclusion of an article quite relevant to the present discussion: "[M]ost Muslim scholars are unlikely to adopt a nonnormative approach to the study of Islam and Muslim societies. The adoption of a "non-ideological" approach poses serious theological problems for Muslim

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<sup>7</sup> Maishanu, "The Comparative Method in the Study of Religion: A Case Study of Al-'Amiri and Al-Biruni and Some Selected Modern Western Approaches".

<sup>8</sup> See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1988), 281-84. See also Dīn Muḥammad, "Min Manāhij 'Ulamā' al-Muṣimīn fī Dirāsāt al-Adyān (Some Methods of the Muslim Scholars in Study of Religions)," *Annual Journal of the International Islamic University/Hawliyyat al-Jāmi'ah al-'Islāmiyyah al-Ālamiyyah* 3 (1995). The next part of the present study includes a survey of the Muslim views of the western tradition of religious studies.

<sup>9</sup> See Dīn Muḥammad, "Mushkilat al-Manhaj fī 'Ilm al-Dīn al-Muqārīn fī al-Gharb (The Problem of Method in the Science of Comparative Religion in the West)," *Hawliyyat al-Jām'ah al-'Islāmīyyah Al-Ālamiyyah* 1 (1993).



scholars. *Is it admissible to be agnostic or atheistic merely for the sake of academic enquiry?*”<sup>10</sup>

Now, for the sake of consistency one cannot applaud the work of classical scholars, say for instance that of al-Bīrūnī, using the labels like ‘*Religionswissenschaft*’ and ‘academic study of religion’ and at the same time oppose the approaches which these concepts are known to pertain to. The paradox can be interpreted either in terms of internal diversity of the Muslim intellectual responses to, and appropriations of the contemporary religious studies or by assuming that the constructions like ‘*wissenschaft*’, ‘academic study’ and ‘science’ are used here in a heuristic or generic sense. In fact, both of the possibilities are likely but the latter appears to be more evident one as several of the authors who celebrate the classical Muslim contributions to the study of religion also critique the religious studies approaches. Thus, it appears that in order to make it accessible to the contemporary mind the concerned authors are rephrasing a past intellectual tradition into the modern academic terminology but at the same time do not approve the epistemological foundations on which this terminological system rests. In principle, this might be an adequate academic procedure but the pitfalls are quite obvious. Without a sophisticated model of compatibility any technical term taken out of its cultural milieu and transposed to a different culture is prone to create confusions, even distortions.

In cognizance of the fact that here familiar modern categories are being applied heuristically to a cluster of texts from distant past and the complications this procedure involves, taking recourse to the distinction of etic and emic standpoints for intercultural understanding propounded by the American linguist and anthropologist Kenneth L. Pike (1912–2000) can be helpful.<sup>11</sup> A cultural system can be approached initially in etic terms, that

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<sup>10</sup>Dangor, "The Attitude of Muslim Scholars to New Approaches in Religious Studies," 284 [Emphasis added].

See also, Bilal Gökkir, "The Application of Western Comparative Religious and Linguistic Approaches to the Qur'ān in Turkey," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 14, no. 3 (2003). Cf. Fazlur Rahman, "Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies: Review Essay," in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard C. Martin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985).

<sup>11</sup>Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1967). Cf. Thomas N. Headland, "Introduction: A Dialogue Between Kenneth Pike and Marvin Harris on Emics and Etics," in *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate*, ed. Kenneth L. Pike Thomas N. Headland, Marvin Harris, *Frontiers of Anthropology* (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications,

is to say, using the categories and conceptual tools not belonging to that very system. However, as soon as the system under study becomes sufficiently familiar the etic units should ideally be replaced by the system's own categories which are called by Pike the emic units. The movement from etic to emic analysis is necessary for understanding a cultural system in its own structural and functional logics. Without etic units intercultural understanding is unconceivable and without the emic units the understanding remains superficial. Keeping this in mind, it may be an inevitable starting point to refer to the past scholarly works on religions as 'polemic', 'theological', 'academic', 'scientific' and so on, but one may not forget that the concerned scholars had probably never thought of their work in these terms. The point to be made is that it can be more illuminating to move ahead of such judgmental categories and try to map out the classical Muslim scholarship on religions using its own terminology and classificatory schema.

Right from the early centuries of the Muslim civilization onwards, the descriptions of different religions appeared under a variety of genres.<sup>12</sup> These genres include *al-munāẓrāt* (polemics), *al-rasā'il* (letters/booklets), *al-ruddūd* (refutations),<sup>13</sup> *al-maqālāt* (treatises),<sup>14</sup> *al-firaq* (sects),<sup>15</sup> and *al-milal wa al-niḥal* (religious traditions and denominations).<sup>16</sup> For

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1990). See also G. Ekstrand & L. H. Ekstrand, "Developing the Emic and Etic Concepts for Cross-cultural Comparisons," in *Educational and Psychological Interactions* (Lund: University of Lund, School of Education, Malmö, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly enough, the works on alchemy and astrology, too, were somehow associated with religions. One of the oldest such work is ascribed to Zosimos (or Rismus) al-Ḥakīm who was a Jew and lived in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, that is, before Islam. An Arabic treatise is ascribed to him, which gives some description of the story of Adam and Eve and their fall from the Heaven along with alchemy, astrology, magic and so on. See Zosimos (Rismus) al-Ḥakīm, "Risālah fī Bayān Tafriq al-Adyān wa-Tafarru' al-'Ibādāt wa-al-Diyānāt wa-al-'Itiqādāt (The Explanation of Differences of Religions and the Variation of Religious Observances, Professions of Faith, and Beliefs)," in *The Islamic Medical Manuscripts at the National Library of Medicine* (Bethesda, Maryland National Library of Medicine, 3rd/4th Cent. CE).

<sup>13</sup> *Kitab al-tanbih wal-radd* by al-Malati (d. 377/987); Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Khalq af'āl al-'ibād wa-al-radd 'alā al-Jahmīyah wa-aṣḥāb al-ṭa'īl* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1984).

<sup>14</sup> *Maqalat al-Islamiyyin* by al-Ashari (d. 324/935)

<sup>15</sup> *Al-Maqalat wal firaq* by al-Qummi (d. 301/914); *Kitab Firaq al-Shi'a* by Nawbakhti (d. 310/922); *Al-Farq bain al-Firaq* by al-Baghdadi (d. 429/1037)

analytical purposes, these genres can be grouped into those which refute the other religions and those which describe them. *Al-munāẓrāt* and *al-ruddūd* fall in the first group, in form as well as in content. To a lesser degree the same holds true for *al-rasāʾil*. Though the word *rasāʾil* (sing. *risālah*) as such does not render a polemical nuance but most of the works bearing this title happen to be polemical, typically addressing some particular disputant from a different religious tradition. The works in the genre of *al-maqālāt* are of general import, bear lesser polemical tone, and do not address to a particular disputant in principle. *Al-fīraq* (sects) genre has to do more with the Muslim sects and their subdivisions but occasionally also touching upon non-Muslim dominations. Whereas *Al-milal wa al-niḥal* renders, literally as well as factually, a more systematic and descriptive textual tradition dealing with religions.

A sizeable number of works on religions, however, appeared with unique titles. Some of them can be easily identified with one or the other genre while others cannot. For instance, it is not difficult to determine the genre of Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyyah's (661/1262–728/1328) *Al-Jawāb al-Saḥīḥ li man Baddala Dīn al-Masīḥ* (An Appropriate Response to those Who have Corrupted the Religion of the Messiah)<sup>17</sup> or that of Samaw'al Ibn Yahyā al-Maghribī's (c.1130–570/1175) *Ifḥām al-Yahūd* (Silencing the Jews).<sup>18</sup> Whereas the titles of the following works are not clearly suggestive of the motive of their authors: *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* (The Book of Idols) by Hishām ibn Muḥammad al-Kalbī (129/747–205/821),<sup>19</sup> *Tahqīqu mā li'l-Hindī min Maqūlah Maqbūlah fī al-'Aqlī aw Marzūlah* (An Inquiry into the Indian Statements be they Rational or Irrational) by Abū Rayhān al-Bīrūnī, *Bayān al-Adyān* (A Description of Religions) written in 1092 CE by Abū al-Ma'ālī Muḥammad ibn 'Ubaydullāh, *Dabistān-e-Mazāhib* (Persian: The Garden of Religions) written between 1645–1654 CE and ascribed to Muḥsin Fānī (d. 1081/1670).

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<sup>16</sup> *Kitāb al-milal wal niḥal* by Ibn Hazm (d. 456/1064); *Kitāb al-milal wal niḥal* by Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153)

<sup>17</sup> Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyyah, *Al-Jawāb al-Saḥīḥ li man Baddala Dīn al-Masīḥ* (An Appropriate Response to those Who have Corrupted the Religion of Messiah) (Riyadh: Dār al-'Āshimah, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> Samaw'al Ibn Yahyā al-Maghribī, *Ifḥām al-Yahūd* (Silencing the Jews) (Cairo: Dār al-Hidāyah, 1986).

<sup>19</sup> Hishām ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* trans. Nabih Amin Faris, Princeton Oriental Studies (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1952).

Accordingly, the pattern emerges that there are two varieties of works on religions, one descriptive and informative while the other normative and disputative. The differentiation of these two types of works is already recognized in the following excerpt taken from the introductory remarks to a recent study on the Muslim understanding of other religions:

Quite often the major underlying motive to know about other religions was to demonstrate that they were flawed and that Islam was superior to all of them. It is remarkable however, that despite this motive, the Muslim scholars concerned with studying religions exhibited two characteristics. First, they engaged in assiduously collecting facts about other religions. Second, they honestly stated the facts at which they had arrived. They doubtlessly refuted the doctrines of other religious traditions, but they were not wont to distort their doctrines or history.... The above, however, was not the only model produced by Muslim scholars. For we also find another model for studying religions other than one's own, a model wherein the impulse to refute other religions is hardly evident.<sup>20</sup>

In keeping with this division, the genres of *al-milal wa al-niḥal*, *al-maqālāt*, *al-firaq* and several other works with unique titles make up a cluster of descriptive studies of religions. On the other hand, the genres of *al-munāẓrāt*, *al-rasāi'l*, *al-ruddūd* and a quite large number of similar works with different titles bear explicit polemic and disputative character. However, it may be cautioned that exceptions to this general classification are possible. Theological assumptions, even judgments, are not difficult to trace in the former type of works while creative methodological initiatives and descriptions of historical value can be found in that of the latter.

Bearing the above observation in mind, the argumentative literature can be further divided into those works which simply engage in the familiar religious disputes repeating or reformulating theological arguments and those which draw on fresh materials on history and

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<sup>20</sup>Zafar Ishaq Ansari, "Foreword," in *Muslim Understanding of Other Religions: A Study of Ibn Ḥazm's Kitāb al-Faṣl fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwā' wa al-Niḥal*, ed. Ghulam Haider Aasi, *Comparative Religion* (Islamabad: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1999), v-vi. However, the contention that the Muslim scholars honestly stated the facts at which they had arrived needs to be qualified as al-Bīrūnī has noted a tendency among the scholars of his age to attribute views to the followers of other religions which they in fact did not hold. See al-Bīrūnī, *Albernuni's India. An account of the religion, philosophy, literature, geography, chronology, astronomy, customs, laws and astrology of India about A.D. 1030 (with notes and indices. By Dr. Edward C. Sachau)*, ???

doctrines of different religions, or devise new methodologies to analyze the already known materials. Perhaps the best example of the latter category is the work of ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad ibn Ḥazm (384/994–456/1064) who devised the method of textual criticism quite similar to the one which Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) and the following generations of Biblical scholars would employ later on.<sup>21</sup> Another example is the approach of Abū al-Ḥasan al-‘Āmirī (d. 382/992). Being a follower of the Ya‘qūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī’s (184/800–259/873) school of philosophy, he “argues for a rational investigation of religious beliefs and praxis, and on the basis of his claim that the ultimate purpose of knowledge is virtuous action, attempts in a programmatic comparison of Islam with other religions to show how Islam is more successful than its rivals at achieving this goal.”<sup>22</sup> In this way, positing confidence in human reason al-‘Āmirī devised a unique comparative method. His reflections on the drawbacks afforded by the ‘comparison of incomparable’ are simply incredible.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, it can be maintained that instead of the binary division of the classical Muslim literature on religions into disputative and descriptive, a tripartite typology is more convincing. In order of the estimated frequency, this literature can be classified as: a) polemics centred on familiar theological disputes, b) works written from confessional standpoint but introducing methodological novelties or recording important historical data on religions, and c) systematic and descriptive studies on religions with no declared apologetic motives.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh al-Sharqāwī, *Manhaj Naqd al-Naṣṣ bayna Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī wa-Isbīnūzā: Fī Manāḥij al-Baḥṭh (The Method of Textual Criticism between Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī and Spinoza: Studies in Methodology)* (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Madīnah, 1993).

<sup>22</sup>Everett K. Rowson, "Al-‘Āmrī," in *History of Islamic Philosophy: Part 1*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman, *Routledge History of World Philosophies Volume 1* (London: Routledge, 1996), 217.

<sup>23</sup>Abū al-Ḥasan al-‘Āmirī, *Al-‘Ilām bi Manāqib al-Islām (An Exposition on the Merits of Islam)* ed. Aḥmad Abd al-Ḥamīd Ghurāb (Riyadh: Darl’-Asalah, 1988), 125. Compare Maishanu, "The Comparative Method in the Study of Religion: A Case Study of Al-‘Amiri and Al-Biruni and Some Selected Modern Western Approaches", 59-65.

<sup>24</sup>Needles to say that this typology can be further expanded but better not to let this issue divert the flow of the narrative.

Muḥammad Khalīfah Ḥasan Aḥmad Khalīfah, too, proposes a somewhat similar typology but arranges it diachronically into three developmental stages. For him, the first stage of the Muslim scholarship on religions can rightly be designated as polemical and loaded with theological presuppositions. However despite this shortcoming, scholars at this stage undertook an enormous amount of research on the origin, history, and development of religions. This stage was followed by ‘the period of the philosophical interpretation of religion’ which implies an objective and non-apologetic interest in different religions. The third and the final stage is represented by works in which the phenomenon of religion(s) was treated as a *sui generis* category instead of a branch of theological and philosophical speculations.<sup>25</sup>

Notwithstanding the merits and novelty of this typology, two observations may be noted here. In the first place, Khalīfah devised this typology in 1970s and for that matter it is entrenched in the then dominant phenomenological paradigm. Thus, it views the whole development culminating in religion as a *sui generis* category. Now, the matter of fact is that the *sui generis* discourse has been a cherished cliché of the phenomenology of religion but later on it came under severe criticism. Today it does not appeal majority of the scholars as a conceptual tool for understanding the religious phenomenon. Secondly, from historical point of view it is difficult to substantiate that there has been a linear development from polemic to non-apologetic and objective study of religions in the history of Muslim scholarship. One of the earliest authors on religions namely al-Kalbī dies in the first quarter of the ninth century CE. His *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* is by and large a descriptive iconography of the pre-Islamic Arabia<sup>26</sup> and it precedes the major polemical works which appeared in the Muslim scholarly tradition. Al-Bīrūnī’s work on Indian religions and culture is rightly considered the most objective contribution by any Muslim scholar to the field of religious studies but his *magnum opus* was followed by confessional works like *Al-Radd al-Jamīl li Ilāhiyyat al-Masīḥ bi Ṣarīḥ al-Injīl* (A Be fitting Refutation of the Divinity of the Messiah by Clear Implication of the Gospel) by

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<sup>25</sup>See Khalīfah, "Medieval Jewish-Muslim contribution to the Academic Study of Religion: A Study of the Methodology of Saadia Al Fayyūmī and Muḥammad Al Shahrastānī", 18-22.

<sup>26</sup>al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*

Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (450/1058–505/1111).<sup>27</sup> In South Asia, the non-polemical *Dabistān-e-Mazāhib* precedes Polemical *Izhār al-Ḥaqq* (Establishing the Truth) by Raḥmatullāh al-Kirānwī (1250/1834–1309/1891). The examples of such anomalies can be further extended. Therefore, it appears more plausible to view all the three varieties of works outlined above as parallel strands of tradition endeavouring throughout the Muslim cultural history to the present day.

Coming back to the question if the Muslim cultural tradition pioneered the comparative study of religions, first of all it is important to clearly single out the genres and works which supposedly constitute the science of comparative religions. The question is in place because some contemporary Muslim scholars have expressed the view that comparison leading to theological judgements is a legitimate academic procedure and that the burden of argument remains on those who want to shun conclusive judgements.<sup>28</sup> These authors consider the normative comparison a unique feature of the Muslim tradition of religious studies and thereby intend to accept the entire range of confessional works as a part of the history of this subject. The possibility of sound judgements on comparative value of religions is not to be disputed here, however, normative judgements hardly fit in the contemporary discipline of religious studies which seeks publicly verifiable descriptive knowledge about the phenomenon of religion. For the sake of disciplinary demarcation the normative comparison can be identified as a different subject, for instance comparative theology of religions, wherein the willing scholars of different religious persuasions can engage in theological dialogue.

In line with this explanation, the first type of *al-munāẓrāt*, *al-ruddūd*, and *al-rasāʾil* literature which counts for exchange of theological argumentations– notwithstanding its historical importance otherwise<sup>29</sup>– cannot be arguably related to the contemporary discipline

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<sup>27</sup> Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Al-Radd al-Jamīl li llāhiyyat al-Mashī bi Ṣarīh al-Injīl* (A Befitting Refutation of the Divinity of Messiah as Clearly Declared in the Gospel) (Cairo: Dār al-Hidāyah, 1986).

<sup>28</sup> Maishanu, "The Comparative Method in the Study of Religion: A Case Study of Al-'Amiri and Al-Biruni and Some Selected Modern Western Approaches". See also Muḥammad, "Mushkilat al-Manhaj fi 'Ilm al-Dīn al-Muqārīn fi al-Gharb (The Problem of Method in the Science of Comparative Religion in the West)."

<sup>29</sup> The attitude of cordoning off polemic as an unethical genre has been contested. See Jonathan Crewe, "Can Polemic be Ethical? A Response to Michael Foucault," in *Polemic: Critical and Uncritical* ed. Jane Gallop

known in today's world as religious studies. Then, there is little doubt that historically the work of Christian and Jewish polemicists preceded that of the Muslims. As for the Christian polemics against the Jews, even names of their genres are comparable with *al-munāẓrāt* and *al-ruddūd*. A source reads: "One whole set of works is specifically devoted to this polemic. They generally have titles such as *Contra Iudaeos* ("Against the Jews"), or *Dialogus adversus Iudeos* ("Dialogue against the Jews"), etc".<sup>30</sup> Also, it may be pointed out that both refutation(*radd*) and polemic (*munāẓrah*) by definition require imagined or actual interlocutors, a fact which in turn nullifies any claim of uniqueness about this strand of scholarship. Construing comparative study of religions in this way leaves nothing especial to claim about the Muslim scholarly tradition.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, the confessional works falling in the second category, which introduce novel methodologies or draw on data of historical importance can be assigned a place in the history of religious studies but only to the extent of their historical or methodological contributions. Thereafter remains the mainly informative genres of *al-milal wa al-niḥal*, *al-firaq*, and *al-maqālāt* in addition to some other works with similar disposition, which can be reasonably considered as the pioneering efforts in the

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(New York: Routledge, 2004), 148. In the history of Muslim scholarship, a whole subgenre named *Adab al-Munāẓrah* (Etiquettes of Polemic) is devoted to the methods as well as ethics of polemics. See for instance 'Abd Al-Rahmān Jankah al-Maydānī, *Ḍwābiṭ'l-Ma'rifah wa Usūl al-Istidlāl wa al-Munāẓrā* (*Principles of Knowledge and Foundations of Inference and Polemic*) (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1993).

<sup>30</sup> Gilbert Dhan, *The Christian Polemic against the Jews in the Middle Ages*, trans. Jody Gladding (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 41. An example of the earlier Jewish polemic against Christians is found in Daniel J. Lasker and Sarah Stroumsa, *The Polemic of Nestor the Priest: Introduction, Translations and Commentary* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East, 1996).

<sup>31</sup> The reciprocal nature of polemical literature is documented in such works as Rifaat Ebied and David Thomas, ed., *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades: The Letter from the People of Cyprus and Ibn Abī Tālib al-Dimashqī's Response* (Leiden: Brill, 2005). A comprehensive volume cataloguing manuscripts of the apologetic literature in Arabic, by Muslims as well as Christians and Jews, was published in Leipzig in 1877; see the reprint edition: Moritz Steinschneider, *Polemische und apologetische Literatur in arabischer Sprache: zwischen Muslimen, Christen und Juden, nebst Anhängen verwandten Inhalts* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1966). For medieval Christian polemical and theological responses to Islam see John Victor Tolan, ed., *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam* (London: Routledge, 1996). See also R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978).



worldwide history of religious studies. The term *al-milal wa al-niḥal* is sometimes used in more general sense to allude to this set of genres and similar works.

### 3.2 The Question of Disciplinary Identity

However, existence of a set of informative and largely descriptive works as such does not warrant the study of religions to be an established and independent science. The pertinent question is that if only a fraction of the classical Muslim literature on religions is accepted as religious studies, does it indeed makes a disciplinary tradition or rather counts for a few scattered works owing to the liberal orientation of some individual scholars? In order to answer this question, such works may be viewed in the context of overall Muslim intellectual traditions. Fortunately, a series of classical bibliographies are extant which classify various scholarly works according to different subjects and disciplines. A simple yet tenable method to evaluate the status of works on religions within the classical Muslim literary tradition would be to scan through these bibliographical indexes to verify if they record the study of religions as an independent branch of knowledge? According to this emic criterion, the answer seems to be affirmative according to at least one bibliographical record. Abū al-Faraj Muḥammad ibn Ishāq al-Nadīm's (d. 385/995 or 388/998) *Kitāb al-Fihrist* devotes a separate chapter to describe the subject of religions.<sup>32</sup> More importantly from the view point of the present discussion, this chapter completely ignores the polemical and apologetic genres which can be taken as a testimony that the tradition itself was somehow aware of the typological distinctions in the scholarship on religions.

From another point of view, in the Muslim intellectual tradition a distinction is established between the transmitted sciences (*al-manqūlāt*) and rationale sciences (*al-ma'qūlāt*). The classification goes back to 'Abd al-Raḥman ibn Muḥammad ibn Khaldūn (1332/732–1406/808)<sup>33</sup> and it is grounded in the standard Muslim epistemology which endorses three sources of knowledge namely reason, sense experience, and authentically

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<sup>32</sup> Abū al-Faraj Muḥammad ibn Ishāq al-Nadīm, *Al-Fihrist* (Beirut: Maktabat Khayyat, 1966).

<sup>33</sup> See, 'Abd al-Raḥman ibn Muḥammad ibn Khaldūn, *Al-Muqaddimah* (Cairo: Maṭba' Muṣṭafah al-Tijāriyyah, 1997).

transmitted report of the truth.<sup>34</sup> The disciplines like philosophy (*al-falsafah/al-ḥikmah*), logic (*al-manṭiq*) and medicine (*al-ṭibb*) are based primarily on reason and sense experience and for that matter called the rational sciences. On the other end of the scale, disciplines such as exegesis of Qur'ān (*al-tafsīr*), Prophetic traditions (*al-ḥadīth*), and jurisprudence (*al-fiqh*) depend on the authentically transmitted religious reports and therefore called the transmitted sciences. The connecting link between these two sets of disciplines is what may be called the science-of-the-sciences (*‘ilm al-usūl*).<sup>35</sup> In the Muslim civilization most of the established disciplines – be they transmitted or rational – flourished with their corresponding science-of-the-science. For instance, *usūl al-ḥadīth* (principles of authentication and interpretation of the Prophetic traditions) developed along with *al-ḥadīth* and *usūl al-fiqh* (Principles of Jurisprudence) along with *al-fiqh*. Being science-of-the-science, *‘ilm al-usūl* resembles what Popper calls the second-order reflections on the first-order knowledge traditions.<sup>36</sup>

Against this background, in order for a collection of scholarly works to be considered as an established and autonomous discipline, (non-)existence of the corresponding science-of-the-science or second order tradition can be an important clue. Now, in the available Muslim literary heritage the second-order reflections on the principles of studying religions are scant. Using the emic categories, there is no known tradition of *usūl al-milal wa al-niḥal*. It is not to deny that the major works on religions contain introductory remarks on the problems involved in the study and comparison of religions but no complete book is known to us which specifically discusses such issues. However, the extensive debates on the relationship between reason and religion<sup>37</sup> in general and the compatibility of rational argument (*al-dalīl*

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<sup>34</sup> Sa'ad al-Din al-Taftazani, *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id al-Nasfiyyah* (Cairo: Maktabah al-Kuliyyat al-Azhariyyah, 1988), 15-22.

<sup>35</sup> See Hasan Mahmoud al-Shafi'i, *al-Madkhal ila dirāsāt 'Ilm al-Kalām* (Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 1991).

<sup>36</sup> However a qualification may be added that *'Ilm al-usūl* takes certain assumptions for granted which are seldom subjected to critical inquiry whereas critical reflection is essential in Popper's conception of the second-order tradition. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, 127.

<sup>37</sup> *Abū al-Walīd Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Rushd [Averroes] (1126–1198), Faṣl al-Maqāl fi ma bayn al-Falsafah wa al-Dīn min al-Itiṣāl* (The Conclusive Debate on Harmony of Philosophy and Religion)

*al-‘aqlī*) and religiously transmitted argument (*al-dalīl al-naqlī*) in particular<sup>38</sup> assuage this lacuna to some extent. These theoretical discussions can be considered as a sort of general second-order tradition having bearings for disciplines such as theology (*al-kalām*), philosophy (*al-falsafah/al-hikmah*), history (*al-tarīkh*), and, last but not the least, the study of religions.

Another possible criterion concerns about the continuity and interconnectivity of these works. This criterion can be framed with reference to such questions: Do the subsequent scholars refer to the works of their predecessors and thus accumulate the knowledge on different religions? Has there been a tradition of commentaries and glosses on the seminal texts related to the subject of religions? Did the study of religions generate teacher-student genealogies? In fact, these have been the familiar channels through which the intellectual traditions would branch out in the Muslim history. Collectively these channels are designated with the notion of *al-isnād* (authentication or connectivity). Now, on all these accounts – namely accumulative character, textual continuity, and teacher-student genealogies – the study of religion does not appear at par with most of the established branches of knowledge which emerged and flourished in the Muslim civilization.<sup>39</sup>

In line with these observations, it can be concluded that the Muslim civilization did reach some level of perfection in the historical study of religions but at the same time it would be unrealistic to exaggerate about these early achievements. The above discussion also demonstrates that the epithets like *Religionswissenschaft*, ‘phenomenology of religion’, or even ‘the academic study of religions’ cannot be squarely applied to the work on religions

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<sup>38</sup>Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyyah, *Darr’ Ta’ārud al-‘Aql wa al-Naql (Resolving Conflict between Reason and Authority)* (Riyadh: Muhammad b. Saud Islamic University, 1979).

<sup>39</sup>We are able to trace only one commentary on *al-milal wa al-niḥal* of al-Sharstānī, that is, Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā ibn al-Murtaḍā al-Yamānī, *Kitāb al-Munyah wa-al-amal fī sharḥ al-milal wa-al-niḥal*, ed. Muḥammad Jawād Mashkūr (Beruit: Dār al-Fikr, 1979). For a discussion on the sources of al-Sharstānī see A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn, "Muslim Sects and Divisions: The Section on Muslim Sects in Kitāb al-Milal wa 'l-Niḥal by Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm Shahrastānī," (London: Kegan Paul International, 1984), 4-7. Edward C. Sachau, too, briefly discusses the sources of al-Bīrūnī in the introduction to his English translation of *Kitāb al-Hind*. See, al-Bīrūnī, *Albernuni's India. An account of the religion, philosophy, literature, geography, chronology, astronomy, customs, laws and astrology of India about A.D. 1030 (with notes and indices. By Dr. Edward C. Sachau)*.

produced by the classical Muslim scholars. For, the study of religions in the Muslim historical experience emerged owing to quite different historical factors and epistemological assumptions than those associated with *Religionswissenschaft* in the nineteenth century and its subsequent developments. If one must use the contemporary terminology in order to establish correlations between different knowledge traditions it would be admissible to point out that these appellations are being used heuristically.

On the other hand, summarily labelling the whole classical Muslim scholarship on religions as polemics and apologetics without making the necessary exceptions also misrepresents the historical reality. It appears to be throw-the-baby-out-with-the-bath-water approach. Admittedly, it is not difficult to unearth the underlying biases even in the declaredly non-polemical works like that of al-Bīrūnī<sup>40</sup>, but here one may not forget that beyond a certain level hardly any human science is value free, not even the contemporary religious studies. In this regard, the differentiation between being perfectly objective and trying to be objective makes the whole point abundantly clear. The former is not one of the human possibilities, the latter definitely is.<sup>41</sup> It is trying-to-be-objective character which a critic may expect in a scholarly endeavour. Beyond that, the biases can and should be exposed but that does not blemish the scholarliness of the work under scrutiny.

Keeping in view such observations, the present study uses a relatively modest and neutral phrase ‘the Muslim study of religions’ to refer to the contributions of the Muslim scholars. The phrase deliberately evades a priori negative or positive judgements. The expression also allows qualified inclusion of the confessional works which document important historical data or bring about methodological advancements. ‘Religions’ in plural signifies that the Muslim scholarship remained primarily study of positive religions. ‘Religion’ as a category was seldom objectified. Consequently, in contrast with the European history of the discipline there has been no rift between the study of religion and religions in the Muslim scholarly tradition.

### **3.3 The Theoretical Underpinnings of *al-Milal wa al-Nihāl* Tradition**

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<sup>40</sup> Al-Bīrūnī explicitly writes that his work is not polemical, see al-Bīrūnī, *Alberuni's India. An account of the religion, philosophy, literature, geography, chronology, astronomy, customs, laws and astrology of India about A.D. 1030 (with notes and indices. By Dr. Edward C. Sachau).*

<sup>41</sup> Pye, "Problems of Method in the Interpretation of Religion," 116.

As hinted at above, the emergence and development of the Muslim study of religions in their plurality can be viewed both with reference to the Qur'ānic worldview and the epistemology that stemmed from it, as well as in context of the encounters with other religious traditions which the Muslim civilization went through in its history. This projected breakdown parallels the analysis of contemporary religious studies in the foregoing chapter trying to combine the elements of history of ideas and the sociology of knowledge.

Islam already emerged in a religiously plural world and presented itself over against the surrounding religious convictions. The first slayable of the basic creedal proclamation—truthful utterance of which is necessary to enter into the fold of Islam – comprise an affirmation and a negation. In fact, the negation precedes the affirmation in this creedal formulation: ‘There is no god but Allah’ (*Lā ilāha illAllāh*). The point to be made is that religious identity of the new faith community developed in relation to the existing alternatives. In this connection, the distinction of primal and critical forms of religions further illustrates the point. In variance with the primal religions, critical religions emerge creating a difference from the accepted religious culture of their time. According to this typology, Islam is counted as a critical religion.<sup>42</sup>

However, it needs to be taken into account that although Islam vehemently denounced the pagan elements of the pre-Islamic Arabia but it adapted a range of existing rituals and religious symbols considering them survivals of the pristine religion proclaimed by Abraham (Ibrāhīm) and his son Ishmael (Ismā‘īl).<sup>43</sup> The pilgrimage to Mecca (*ḥajj*) which is one of the five basic pillars of Islam already existed in the Arab religion and culture. The same is the case with sanctity of *Ka‘bah*, lunar calendar with four sacred months, and the male circumcision, to name a few elements which serve as the identity markers of the Muslim

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<sup>42</sup>Michael Pye, "The study of religions and the dialogue of religions," *Marburg Journal of Religion* 6, no. 2 (2001): 5.

<sup>43</sup> Hawting maintains that pre-Islamic Arabs whom Qur'an condemns as idolaters were in fact monotheists. Though we do not agree with this thesis but find it interesting to the extent that it underscores Islam's dialectical relationship with the existing Arab culture. See G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 150-51.

religious tradition (*sha‘ā’ir al-Islām*). Thus, in one sense it is correct to call Islam a ‘critical’ religion<sup>44</sup> but at the same time its affirmative character may not be overlooked.

It may also be noted that Qur’ān frequently refers to different religious traditions known in the Arabia at that time including Judaism, Christianity, Sabianism and Magianism, as well as religious positions like polytheism (*shirk*) and different forms of atheism. According to an important authority on the Qur’ānic sciences, one out of five recurring themes of Qur’ān is debate on religions(*mukhāsmat al-adyān*).<sup>45</sup> A set of notions is found in Qur’ān pertaining to religions and religious communities, which shows the centrality of this theme in Qur’ān. According to the Qur’ānic usage *dīn* (pl. *adyān*) refers to religion, *millah* (pl. *milal*) to religious tradition, and *ummah* (pl. *ummam*) to a faith community.<sup>46</sup> The nuances of these notions imply that Qur’ān affirms universality of religious phenomenon and recognises the diversity of religious traditions in a certain way. It is safe to assume that the peculiar Qur’ānic view of religions has been conducive to interest in other religions which resulted in different types of studies as discussed above.

First of all, the dual nature of Islam’s connection with the pre-Islamic religious culture, which combines negation and affirmation, becomes more explicit when it comes to the established traditions of Christianity and Judaism. Islam acknowledges the truth of Judaism and Christianity and affirms the divine origin of their sacred scriptures. Qur’ān proclaims to be a continuation of the previous revelations from God, namely Torah (*al-Tawrāt*), Psalms (*al-Zabūr*), and Gospel (*al-Injīl*)<sup>47</sup> confirming them as well complementing

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<sup>44</sup>Muḥammad ibn Wahhāb has written a book on this issue entitled: *The Customs Of Pre-Islamic Ignorance From Which Islam Distanced Itself*.

<sup>45</sup>Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dhelawī, *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr fī ‘Ilm al-Tafsīr*, trans. Rashīd Aḥmad (Lahore: Idārah-i-Islāmiyyāt, 1982), 4-6.

<sup>46</sup>For a detailed discussion of these terms see Aasi, *Muslim Understanding of Other Religions: A Study of Ibn Ḥazm’s Kitāb al-Faṣl fī al-Milal wa al-Aḥwā’ wa al-Niḥal*, 3-15. See also Ghulam Haider Aasi, "The Qur’ān and Other Religious Traditions " *Hamdard Islamicus* 9, no. 2 (1986). It may be cautioned that religion is not the exact translation of the Qur’ānic term *dīn*.

<sup>47</sup>The word *Injīl* occurs in Qur’an always in singular hence according to the Muslim belief there was a single Gospel which was revealed onto Jesus (‘*Isā*).

them. This dual character of Qur'ān with relation to the previous scriptures is stated in the following verse:

And unto thee have We revealed the Scripture with the truth, confirming whatever Scripture was before it, and a watcher over it... (Q, 5: 48)

Within the framework of the Muslim theology, it is the 'watcher over it' (*muḥayminan 'alayhi*) role of Qur'ān which culminates in pointing out the corruption (*tahrīf*) in the previous scriptures committed by the followers of these religions. (Q, 5: 48) In short, Qur'ān affirms the divine origin of Christianity and Judaism but reproaches certain Christian and Jewish practices including their failure to preserve the original message of God and for that matter partly denies the truth claims of these religions. Now, it has been analysed in the previous chapter how the contemporary religious studies emerged out of ambivalence towards religions, accepting their historical importance but refusing their claim of privileged accesses to truth. In the present case, too, a comparable ambivalence - for want of a better word - is noticeable. One side of the ambivalence generates and sustains the interest in religions while the other makes possible their objectification. Needless to say, interest and objectification are two necessary conditions in order for a tradition of study of religions to come into existence and thrive.

Secondly, Qur'ān recognizes the plurality of religions and explains it in a particular way which has the potential to generate interest in different religions. According to the Qur'ānic view, right from the beginning of the human life on earth God has been sending His messengers and prophets, one after the other, to every people. The basic proclamation of all the messengers was same, that is, unity of God and the life after death. However, since it has been the divine scheme to give human beings a free choice as regards the acceptance of God's message, people got divided into those who heeded to the call of the messengers and submitted to it (*muslimūn*) and those who denied it (*kuffār*). In short, the first reason behind religious diversity owes to the freedom of choice sanctioned by God Himself: "Let there be no compulsion in the matters of religion" (Q, 2: 256). The second explanation relates to the notion of *tahrīf*. That with the passage of time religious leaders corrupted the original Word of God because of their short-sighted material benefits. They either interpolated extra elements or concealed certain aspects of truth which resulted in differences of religious convictions. Then, it also occurs that people fancy about religion without any guidance and validation from God (*sulṭān*) (Q, 7: 71) and end up fabricating false gods. In all these cases,

the Muslim theology recognizes religious diversity as a matter of fact but does not approve it. In other words, God lets it happen but does not like it. (Q, 5: 48)

However, another Qur'ānic explanation of religious diversity is directly ascribed to God. The religion (*dīn*) of all the messengers of God was one and the same but every one of them was conferred on with different law (*shir'ah*) and approach (*minhāj*) (Q, 5: 48) apt for his people and time. Also, every messenger received the revelation of God in the language of his people. Thus, one and the same religion (*dīn*) diversified into different religious traditions (*milal*) and faith communities (*ummam*). In this sense, religious diversity is not only recognized but also approved in Islam.<sup>48</sup> From the very name of the classical genre *al-milal wa al-niḥal* it is evident that this peculiar Qur'ānic view of religious diversity has been conducive to the study of religions in the Muslim history.

Thirdly, apart from recognizing diversity the Qur'ānic view of religions provided with different parameters for classification and discernment. Thus, established traditions of Christianity and Judaism are classified as People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*) and clearly distinguished from the non-institutional paganism, for instance. Within the People of the Book, Christians are admired for their modesty and generosity and considered closest in affinity with the Muslims. (Q, 5: 82) Then, the fact that Qur'ān warrants difference of individual temperaments within a single religious tradition (Q, 3: 113) provides a framework to avert stereotypes, if one so wills. Most importantly, Qur'ān unequivocally discourages passing judgments on the religious merits or demerits of other people. The final judgement on the matters about which people differ with each other belongs to God alone. (Q, 22:17; 88: 25-26) Obviously, the concept of deferring the judgement to the Judgement Day is potentially supportive to non-judgmental and descriptive scholarship on religions.

Thus, certain Muslim scholars found a theoretical framework through which they could interpret the plurality of religions and explore the religious world. This framework allowed these scholars, who have been otherwise committed believers in Islam, to study other religious traditions descriptively without criticising them. It can be argued that in a way they were substantiating the Qur'ānic view of religions and by implication deepening their

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<sup>48</sup> However, according to the mainline Muslim theology, unlike the previous prophets who were sent for particular people, Prophet Muḥammad is sent for the whole humanity which implies that now all the people are required to accept his prophet-hood and follow his *sharī'ah*.



understanding of Islam. That is why the genres of *al-milal wa al-niḥal*, *al-muqālāt* and *al-firaq* encompass different Muslim sects as well as non-Islamic traditions.

By the way of conclusion, the dynamics of the Muslim scholarship on religions can be explained with reference to a particular dialectics of self and Other. On the one hand, the religious self was projected without. Putting it differently, the Muslim scholars approached other religious traditions as ‘islams’ of various communities. On the other hand, sometimes the religious Other was seen within. That is to say, the roots of different Muslim sects were being traced in other religious traditions.<sup>49</sup> For instance, Qadarites’ belief in stark predestination was linked to Magianism, Shiites’ excessive veneration of the family of Prophet was connected to the Jewish idea of ‘chosen people’, and Sufi doctrine of annihilation in God (*fanā fī Allāh*) was seen as an influence of the Nirvana of the Indian religions. Putting this circular relation of the self and Other in nutshell, the understanding of Other was sought through extension of the self and conversely the self was identified over against the Other. Thus, the study of Muslim sects and other religious traditions made a single disciplinary tradition.

### 3.3 The Methodological Foundations

Thus far the theoretical underpinnings, the epistemological foundations and methodologies of *al-milal wa al-niḥal* scholarship remain to be outlined. It has been maintained in the beginning of this section that the surrounding religious environment was influential in the early Muslim self perceptions. Apparently, this seems to be a constructionist position with regard to the revelation of Qur’ān. In fact, it is not necessarily so. The Muslim tradition itself conceives the revelation to be reflexive vis-à-vis the spatiotemporal factors. According to the Muslim faith, the revelation of Qur’ān occurred in two phases. God sent down the entire Qur’ān to a celestial station called the House of Honour (*Bayt al-‘Izzah*) wherefrom it was gradually revealed onto the heart of Prophet Muḥammad over a period of about twenty three years. Thus, Qur’ān is the Book of God (*Kitāb-Allāh*) viewed with reference to its first revelation and also the Word of God (*Kalām Allāh*) as regards its gradual

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<sup>49</sup>Aasi, *Muslim Understanding of Other Religions: A Study of Ibn Ḥazm's Kitāb al-Faṣl fī al-Milal wa al-Ahwā' wa al-Niḥal*, 28.

revelation onto the heart of Prophet Muḥammad. In a manner of speaking, *the Muslim theology perceives Qur'ān both as text and speech*.

Now, as a speech act cannot be conceived in isolation from the communication situation, Qur'ān includes references to historical events, comments on the deeds of certain people, and responses to the questions raised by particular individuals. As a logical consequent, the understanding of Qur'ān depends a lot on the context of a particular verse or a set of verses. Also the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad have been important for understanding Qur'ān as he is believed to be vested with the authority to explain Qur'ān. Moreover, he enlivened the Qur'ānic message and presented a role model (*uswatun ḥasanah*) (Q, 33: 21) for the faith community. The dual importance of this epoch developed an exceptional historical consciousness in the Muslim mind. In fact, this historical consciousness became the corner stone of the subsequent institutionalization of Islam and the Muslim civilization.

The newly emerged faith community took over as its religious duty to preserve the text of Qur'ān and the contexts of its revelations as well as the life and teachings of the Prophet. For this purpose, the scholars needed to develop reliable methodologies in order to note down an enormous amount of historical data with minute details and utmost care. An entire range of sciences branched out of this concern. In addition to general history and historiography, these sciences include 'contexts of the revelations' (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), 'science of reporting traditions' (*'ilm-riwāyah*), 'the science of authenticating reports/traditions' (*'ilm-dirayah*) and so on.<sup>50</sup>

The distinction of *al-riwāyah* and *al-dirayah* bears especial relevance to the present discussion. *Al-riwāyah* is the skill to record a report accurately, regardless of its content, to ensure the empirical connection between a reported event and the reporter, and if between the reported event and the reporter additional transmitters involve then to ensure the continuity between the series of transmitters. Logically, *al-riwāyah* expertise also means the ability to evaluate a report against the established standards. It is only *al-dirayah* science which concerns about the content of a report.<sup>51</sup> Now, *the separation of the issue of historicity and*

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<sup>50</sup> Abū al-Ḥasn 'Alī b. Aḥmad, *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* (Jeddah: Dār al-Qiblah li al-Thaqāfah al-Islāmiyyah, 1986).

<sup>51</sup> See, Zayn al-Dīn b. Ibrāhīm b. al-Najīm, *Fath al-Ghaffār bi Sharḥ al-Manār* (Cairo, Egypt: Ma'tba' Muṣṭafā al-Bābi al-Ḥalbī wa Awlāduhū, 1936).

*authenticity of a report from its content implies what may be called in today's language methodological agnosticism in historical research.*

On the other hand, understanding Qur'ān as the 'Book of God' and a huge mass of traditional reports needed another kind of expertise namely analysis and interpretation of a given text. For this purpose, scholars developed sophisticated hermeneutical tools. For example, they distinguished how a particular text means, entails, presupposes, or hints at something and how these nuances can be prioritised in case of an apparent contradiction. They were also familiar with the concept of hermeneutical circle, that is, interpretation of the part with reference to the whole and vice versa. Similar to the case of historical consciousness, the hermeneutical expertise too developed into a 'multidisciplinary' and 'interdisciplinary' project. The observation is supported by the fact that the glosses, super-glosses, marginal notes, summaries, and commentaries make up the substantial textual corpus of virtually every branch of knowledge which surfaced in the Muslim cultural history. For quite many scholars, scholarship simply meant an ability to understand and interpret the seminal texts of the field of knowledge in question.

From another aspect, Qur'ān unequivocally exhorts use of reason and reflection on the signs of God (*al-āyāt*). Interestingly, according to the Qur'ānic view both verses of Qur'ān and the creation of God pertain to the signs of God. The signs in the creation are divided into those found in human beings (*āyāt al-anfus*) and those in the cosmos (*āyāt al-āfāq*), (Q, 41: 53) that is, both at micro and macro levels. The open and repeated invitation to reflection on creation implied observation of the empirical world around. This helped Muslims develop the inductive method for acquisition of knowledge. The use of reason already implied deduction and inference. Hence, a sort of integrative knowledge tradition developed which sought to combine inductive and deductive methods. To be sure, the Muslim civilization owed a lot for its cultural achievements to the borrowings from the Persian, Indian, Chinese, and Greco-Roman civilizations.<sup>52</sup> The most original Muslim intellectual contributions, nonetheless, culminated in hermeneutical and historiographical expertises which in turn had been grounded in combination of inductive and deductive methods.

Now, a bird's eye view survey of the Muslim works on religions shows that whatever objectivity and methodological innovation in this scholarship is noticeable, with a few

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<sup>52</sup>Alī Sāmī al-Nashshār, *Nash'ah al-Fikr al-Falsafi fī al-Islām* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1995).

exceptions it is a result of the hermeneutical and/or historiographical expertise. Thus, the scholar like al-Bīrūnī, al-Shaharastānī and Ibn Nadīn seem to be following the procedures of science of reporting traditions (*‘ilm al-riwāyah*) which bar them from taking positions except on the issue of historicity of the content of their reports, much the same like an expert of this field would be doing while dealing with the Prophetic traditions. Luckily for these scholars, this approach is prized today for being ‘descriptive’ and for that matter more ‘scholarly’. While the scholars such as Ibn Ḥazm, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn Taymiyyah, employ their hermeneutical skills on the Christian and Jewish textual materials. Since hermeneutics is all about interpretation and meanings, quite understandably they take positions, which make their scholarship ‘normative’ according to the contemporary terminology. Or possibly it can be the other way round, that is, these scholars wanted to establish certain theological positions that is why they opted for textual criticism and hermeneutical approach.

In line with the above analysis, it is contended that notwithstanding different types and genres the Muslim scholarship on religions has been rooted in the general knowledge tradition which the Islamic civilization produced. On the whole this tradition is integrative in terms of religion and reason, public and private, deduction and induction, and so on, the distinctions so important for the modern academy. Loosely speaking, this knowledge tradition seems to be ‘theological’ seen from one angle while ‘scientific’ from the other. In fact, it is doubtful if such etic categories are applicable at all in this case. Therefore, even if the non-judgemental works on religions are singled out from the other types, they cannot be viewed as a development over against the Muslim theology. On the contrary, it has been a particular theological-cum-scientific expertise which paved the way for this kind of scholarship.

In order for not to regress to an essentialist and synchronic view of the Muslim of study of religions, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the above narrative. The term ‘Muslim tradition’ or ‘Muslim scholarship’ and so on are used here as ideal types in Weberian sense. Certainly, there have been a host of factors influencing the approach of different Muslim scholars to religions. Such parameters of divergence include historical context, political background, regional circumstances, and last but not the least individual outlook. The present study does not pretend to carry out a survey such as to cover such details. What the present narrative strives to construct is a particular line of argument to interpret the dynamics of encounter of the Muslim and Western traditions of religious studies.

However, in spite of this clarification the following points seem worth mentioning. With a few exceptions such as Ibn al-Rāwandī (211/827-308/921) and Irānsheri, the interest in other religions is difficult to relate to the shaken faith in the received Muslim tradition. On the contrary, it seems that the self-assurance about the truth of their religious convictions gave the Muslim scholars intellectual courage to face the religious other non-apologetically. However, it seems that by and larger the non-apologetic study of religion remained a marginal intellectual tradition. Admittedly, it is difficult, and perhaps also untenable, to bracket different scholars with reference to imagined centre and periphery but some apparent distinctions are interesting to note. First of all, al-Bīrūnī was not a theologian as such. His main interests lie in the ‘positive sciences’ such as geography, astronomy, mathematics, gems, and so on. That is why his approach in historical and cultural works, too, displays a noticeable tendency toward observation and direct personal contact with people of the culture in question. The second outstanding figure of this intellectual legacy is al-Shahrastānī who belonged to the mainline Asharite (al-Ash‘arī) theological school. Nonetheless, his non-apologetic approach to other religions earned him accusations of heresy. Ibn al-Nadīm, the author of *Al-Fihrist*, is said to be a Shiite. If Ibn Ḥazm were to be included in this list, he was a veteran of a minor theological school, namely Zahirite (al-Zāhirī, lit. literalist) school. The author of *Dabistān-i-Mazāhib* is considered to be Muḥsan Fānī, whose theological standing remains in mist.<sup>53</sup>

More the same, geographically most of these scholars appeared in the Muslim societies which were in direct contact with other civilisations and religions, for instance Khurasān (today’s Iran and Central Asia), al-Andalus (today’s Spain), and India. The experience and recognition of religious plurality can be seen here playing the role of a catalyst.

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<sup>53</sup> See “Special Introduction” by A.V. Williams Jackson to Muḥsin Fānī, *Oriental Literature of Dabistān al-Madhāhib*, ed. M. Abdel Haleem, trans. David Shea and Anthony Troyer (Lahore: Khalil & Co., 1973).

**Part 2: Study of the Other's Scholarship: The Growth of  
Second-Order Disciplinary Traditions**

## **Chapter 4:**

### **4. Western Views of the Muslim Study of Religions**

Religionswissenschaft hat in den letzten Jahrzehnten ihren Platz in der Reihe der Wissenschaften erobert und gehandhabt. Wohl liebt man es, Männer wie den indischen Kaiser Akbar oder den mohammedanischen Philosophen Averroes als Vorläufer dieser Studien zu betrachten, weil sie für das relative Recht mehrerer Religionen einen offenen Sinn hatten; allein ihre Religionsvergleiche waren doch zu beschränkt, und ihr Interesse dabei zu wenig rein wissenschaftlich, um sie als solche anzuerkennen. (Chantepie de la Saussaye, 1905)

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[T]here is general agreement among historians of the history of religions that Islamic civilization produced the greatest pre-modern historical studies of world religions. Indeed, Western scholarly approbation of this literature has been sustained and enthusiastic, based on the observation that that historical science was pioneered by Muslims. (Steven M. Wasserstrom, 1988)

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[T]he theological underpinnings of that [Islamic] culture were such that the study of other cultures was irrelevant. Acceptance of Islam as the true and final religion implied that other systems of beliefs that differed from it were simply either wrong or superfluous and therefore not worthy of study. (Abraham H. Khan, 1990)

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The history of constructive and confrontational encounters between Muslim world and Christendom goes back to the rise of Islam itself. According to the Muslim traditional accounts, Prophet Muhammad had written a letter to the Byzantine Emperor Heracles and invited him to embrace Islam. Heracles received this letter while he was in Jerusalem on a tour. He summoned in his court Abū Sufyān, the then tribal chief of Mecca, and inquired about the personality of Muhammad and fundamental teachings of the religion proclaimed by him.

<sup>1</sup> A few years later, a large delegation of Christians from Najrān - a territory south of Medina near Yemen- visited Medina and argued with the Prophet of Islam on matters of faith like nature of God and the status of Jesus. The delegates were received in the Prophet's Mosque and allowed to pray in it according to their religious rites.

Ever since these initial conversations and contacts, the Muslim world and Christendom have been in constant engagement with each other on different fronts. The early expansion of Muslim rule into the Mediterranean Byzantium territories and then into the Iberian peninsula, *Reconquista movement in Spain*, Crusades, Byzantium-Ottoman wars, colonization of the Muslim countries and the subsequent freedom movements, remapping of Middle East by the European powers after the First World War, Gulf Wars around the end of the twentieth century, and lately the spillover effects of Afghan jihad in the form of global terrorism and the resultant wars, count for a long series of encounters between the Muslim world and what is loosely identified today as the "West". Notwithstanding the fact that these engagements have been quite often confrontational, a variety of conciliatory and constructive contacts also took place throughout the centuries. The coexistence of Muslims, Christians, and Jews during the Muslim rule in Spain<sup>2</sup> and the contemporary phenomenon of Muslim Diasporas in Europe and North America can be cited as examples.

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<sup>1</sup> These events have been reported in *Al-Jāmi' al-Sahīh*, (chapter "Bad' al-Wahīy") which was compiled by Muhammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī (194/810-256/870). It is considered one of the six most authentic sources of the Prophetic Traditions.

<sup>2</sup> This coexistence has been studied in detail in Mark R Cohen, *Under the Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). And Lucien Gubbay, *Sunlight and Shadow: The Jewish Experience of Islam* (London: IB Tauris, 2002).



Understandably, this long and more or less unbroken chain of encounters and contacts generated a variety of mutual perceptions between Muslims and the predominantly Christian Europe and North America. Although some studies show a steady development towards better mutual understanding along the axis of time,<sup>3</sup> these mutual perceptions had been quite often misconceptions about each other. However, after the nineteenth century two important differences marked a new beginning. First, after the expansion of Europe through travels, exploration voyages, and colonization, the magnitude and scope of mutual contacts of the two cultural and religious traditions increased to an extent which had no match in the past. Second, a corollary of the increased contacts was that along with many new arenas, scholarly traditions of the respective Other also became an object of inquiry for the first time. What is even more important is the fact that now scholars from both traditions were not only venturing to understand the Other but also making efforts to understand how the Other perceives them. One can see that in the course of such multilayered reciprocal and mutual perceptions, the encounter of the Muslim and Western scholarly traditions extended from the first order to the second order level. The leading role behind this development was undoubtedly played by the Western scholars.

Now, Western views of the Muslim study of religions are variegated and sometimes mutually contradictory. As early as 1905, one of the “fathers” of *Religionswissenschaft* Chantepie de la Saussaye remarked that the scientific study of religion claimed a place among sciences only at the end of nineteenth century. Previously, men like Indian Emperor Akbar and Muslim philosopher Averroes cannot be considered as pioneers of such studies because they were more interested in establishing relative superiority of religions and, therefore, their interest was not scientific enough.<sup>4</sup> Moving onwards to the last decade of the twentieth century, a Canada based scholar draws similar conclusion with regard to the question if ‘the academic study of religion’ could have emerged in the context of Islamic culture. According to our author, the reason being that

the theological underpinnings of that [Islamic] culture were such that the study of other cultures was irrelevant. Acceptance of Islam as the true and final religion

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance, Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*.

<sup>4</sup> Saussaye, *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte*, 2. See also, Pummer, “Religionswissenschaft or Religiology?,” 94.

implied that other system of beliefs that differed from it were simply either wrong or superfluous and therefore not worthy of study.<sup>5</sup>

More the same, after mentioning the approach of leading figures such as al-Bīrūnī who are often appreciated for having made valuable contributions in the field of religious studies in the pre-modern times, the same writer contends that: “these fleeting moments of intellectual boldness were just possibilities which never developed into the academic study of religion.”<sup>6</sup>

One would be perplexed to find out that a number of other reputed scholars have arrived at the conclusion which squarely contradicts the above adopted position. For example, Frantz Rosenthal remarks that “The comparative study of religions has been rightly acclaimed as one of the great contributions of Muslim civilization to mankind’s intellectual progress.”<sup>7</sup> In a similar tone, Steven Wasserstrom who is based at Reed College, Portland, Oregon, writes that

there is general agreement among historians of the history of religions that Islamicate civilization produced the greatest pre-modern historical studies of world religions. Indeed, Western scholarly approbation of this literature has been sustained and enthusiastic, based on the observation that that historical science was pioneered by Muslims.<sup>8</sup>

Depending on one’s liking, quotations supporting either of the two opposing positions can be extended. However, such an exercise is unlikely to bring us closer to a coherent picture of the things. In what follows, therefore, we shall try to figure out how Western views of the Muslim study of religions gradually developed and how these views are related with the perceived disciplinary identity of religious studies. For, the Other is perceived here in relation to the perception of the Self. The reverse is also true. The movement of this dialectical interplay has produced a variety of perceptions about the Muslim study of religions. The perceptions of selected authors have been discussed in the

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<sup>5</sup>Abraham H. Khan, "The Academic Study of Religion with reference to Islam," *The Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 11, no. 1 (1990): 43.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*: 39-40.

<sup>7</sup>Franz Rosenthal, "Preface," in *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions*, ed. Bruce B. Lawrence (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 5.

<sup>8</sup>Wasserstrom, "Islamicate History of Religions?," 408.

forthcoming pages. The choice of authors is based mainly on three principles, though not very exclusively. 1) Those authors have been selected who have contributed at least one book length study. However the next section below named “The Origins of a Second-order Tradition” is an exception as no book length studies on the topic under discussion appeared at that stage. 2) Views of those writers are discussed whose primary vantage point is the discipline of religious studies.<sup>9</sup> 3) It has been tried to maintain a balance between the Anglo-American and continental European scholars in the selection of authors for their supposed difference of approaches as hinted above in the second chapter.

The second-order tradition of Western views of the Muslim study of religions is divided into three types, which can also be seen as three developmental phases, though with some overlap. What follows is a discussion of these types or phases in some detail.

#### **4.1 The Origins of a Second-order Tradition**

Though printing press was already in use in different European cultural centers since the fifteenth century, majority of the Muslim societies remained dependent on manuscripts and human memory for continuity of their scholarly traditions until the second half of the nineteenth century. The Muslim intellectual tradition had subtly knit together written word with human memory in a peculiar way.<sup>10</sup> Students used to study important texts under aegis of authorized teachers who would then certify the competence of their students to teach these

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<sup>9</sup>For instance, there are two remarkable studies on the Muslim perceptions of Christianity, namely, Hugh Goddard's *Muslim Perceptions of Christianity* (London: Grey Seal, 1996) and Kate Zebiri's *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997). However, both of them are not taken into account here firstly for the sheer consideration of feasibility of the task and secondly because their frame of reference is Christian theology. This is possibly an important and legitimate frame of reference in its own right but the present study is not about Christian-Muslim theological exchanges, instead its subject matter is encounters of the Muslim legacy of the study of religions with the contemporary discipline of religious studies. There is another important and oft quoted study in French which should have been taken up for discussion, that is Guy Monnot's *Islam et religions* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1986). However, our incompetence in French language proved to be a limitation here.

<sup>10</sup> See, Dale F. Eickelman, "The Art of Memory: Islamic Education and Its Social Reproduction " *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 20, no. 4 (1978): 487.

texts (*ijāza*) to the following generation of students.<sup>11</sup> Thus, seminal texts had traditions of their associated oral explanations which were transmitted from a generation of scholars to the next one. Sometimes these associated explanations used to be written down and thus become auxiliary texts known as *hawāshī* (marginal notes).

The point to be made is that when the European scholars got access to the written heritage of the Muslim civilization they were unfamiliar with the oral traditions and the system of authorizations associated with scholarly texts. Their attention was focused solely on the written word in the form of manuscripts. It goes without saying that manually written copies of books are not free from discrepancies and some other problems. Consequently, to come into grips with the Muslim intellectual heritage, the European scholars needed not only to learn the languages concerned, they also had to standardize the texts through comparison of different manuscripts. Thus, a massive movement of editing and translation of the oriental manuscripts surfaced in the nineteenth century.

Apparently, the standardization of texts was a problem; however it also proved to be a blessing in disguise. As explained above, the apparatus of the Muslim scholarly tradition included basic texts, marginal notes, traditions of oral explanations, and the institution of *ijāza*. This complex academic procedure had developed a hierarchy of texts. This hierarchy was natural because a vast majority of texts could not be supported with such supplementary procedures. Thus, many scholarly works were referred to in the seminal texts, or mentioned in the bibliographical indices, but they were hardly accessible to scholars because of their limited number of manuscripts. In fact, quite many manuscripts risked to becoming extinct had not the European scholars edited and published them. This line of argument is supported by the following remarks of Franz Rosenthal: "Much of this import material has by now become accessible through bibliographical research, through text editions and translations."<sup>12</sup>

However apart from the preservation of texts, the editing movement also challenged, and in some cases changed the existing hierarchies of texts which the Muslim tradition had

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<sup>11</sup> See for instance, Jonathan P. Berkey, "Madrasas Medieval and Modern: Politics, Education, and the Problem of Muslim Identity," in *Schooling Islam: the Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, ed. Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 43. For a detailed study of the concept of *ijāzah* in Muslim intellectual tradition see, Fayyād 'Abdullāh, *al-Ijāzat al-'Ilmiyyah 'inda al-Muslimīn (Muslims' Concept of the Academic Authorization)* (Baghdad: Matba'at al-Irshād, 1967).

<sup>12</sup> Rosenthal, "Preface."

established. Several branches of the classical Islamic learning got revived while some others went through a process of revision as hitherto uncommon texts became widely accessible. It is against this background that important but ignored works on other religions contributed by the classical Muslim scholars came into limelight.

The Western appraisals of the Muslim study of other religions originated together with the general movement of editing, publishing, and translation of the oriental manuscripts. Mostly, the editors and translators used to write short introductions to the respective works in addition to comments on certain points in texts as marginal notes. A typical introduction usually included biographical sketch of the author concerned, speculation about his motives for writing on other religions, methodological analysis of the work concerned, and in some cases elucidation of political and historical contexts in which the work had been produced. Thus, editing and publication movement of the classical Muslim texts achieved two goals as far as the study of religion is concerned. First, several important works on religions produced by the medieval Muslim scholars became accessible to the academic world for the first time. Second, through their introductions and explanatory notes, the editors and translators also initiated a tradition of second order reflections on the Muslim study of other religions. Let us substantiate this point with some examples.

David Shea (1178-1836) and Anthony Troyer (1769-1865) translated into English a Persian book entitled *Dabistān-i-Madhāhib* (The Garden of Religions) which was published in 1843 from Paris. The work is believed to be written in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in India. In the above mentioned first edition, the work is ascribed to Mīrzā Muhammad Fānī.<sup>13</sup> However in the most of the later editions, including the one at hand with us, the author is named as Muḥsin Fānī. In addition to the original preface written by the translator (Troyer), this edition carries a special introduction written by A. V. Williams Jackson of Columbia University, New York. This introduction was written in 1901. Jackson describes in it the background of translation of the book. Pioneering orientalist Sir William Jones asked Gladwin, who was one of his fellow scholars, to publish at least one chapter of this book in English. Following this lead, David Shea started translating the whole book but was able to complete only half of it. The remaining half was translated by Anthony Troyer afterwards. Jackson makes some remarks in his “Special Introduction” about the intellectual credentials of the author of *Dabistān-i-Madhāhib* and his approach to the subject matter in the following words:

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<sup>13</sup>Mīrzā Muhammad Fānī, *The Dabistān School of Manners*, trans. David Shea and Anthony Troyer, 3 vols. (Paris: Duprat, 1843).

There is no question that with India and speculations, beliefs and the religious rites of Hindus our author was well acquainted. His picture in general is a faithful one. He finds a place to include special as well as the general. The theosophic views of Vedantists and kindred sects are not wanting, and his picture of the Indian Yogis, and mendicants, and the Persian dervishes, mystics and religious devotees is as good as can be found in literature.<sup>14</sup>

Troyer in his "Translator's Preface" describes how *Dabistān-i-Madhāhib* came into the notice of early orientalist scholars like Sir William Jones. Then, he gives a brief sketch of the life and intellectual outlook of the author of the book. Troyer notes that Muḥsin Fānī gives remarkable descriptions of notions, dogmas, customs, and ceremonies of twelve religions. Fānī does not seem interested in the history of these religions except giving the names of their founders. However, he tries to conceive different religious phenomena by categorizations, such as the first principle of religions, the eternity of human soul and so on.<sup>15</sup> Troyer also notes that the author now and then uses indecent language which the common European taste would rebut.<sup>16</sup>

An interesting coincidence is that a few years after publication of *Dabistān-i-Madhāhib* from Paris, al-Shahrastānī's *al-Milal wa al-Nihal* was translated into German by Theodor Haarbrücker who was a specialist of oriental literature at the University of Halle, Germany. The translation was published from Halle in 1850. This translation, too, appeared with twelve pages of foreword written by the translator. He gives a brief history of the reception and use of this book in European scholarly circles, an overview of its main contents and structure. This information is followed by a biographical sketch of al-Shahrastānī which ends with mention of important works which he left behind. Most importantly from the point of view of the present study, Haarbrücker, then, comments on *al-Milal wa al-Nihal* for which al-Shahrastānī is esteemed highly by oriental scholars. In his view the significance of the book lies in the objective description of different religions. To quote him: „*Mehr Werth hat es aber, das seinen Versprechen, eine ungefangene und objectiv Darstellung zu geben, oder, wie*

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<sup>14</sup>A. V. Williams Jackson, "Introduction," in *Oriental Literature or the Dabistan* (Lahore: Khalil & Co., 1973), no pagination.

<sup>15</sup>Anthony Troyer, "Translator's Preface," in *Oriental Literature or Dabistān* (Lahore: Khalil & Co., 1973), 6-7.

<sup>16</sup>David Shea and Anthony Troyer, *Oriental Literature or Dabistān* (Lahore: Khalil & Co., 1973), 10.

*er sich ausdrückt, ohne Hass gegen den Einen, und ohne Verliebe für den Anderen zu schreiben, treulich nachgekommen ist.*<sup>17</sup>

Let us bring up another example of such early appraisals of the Muslim scholars' writings on different religions. Edward Sachau, who had been a professor at the Royal University of Berlin, translated al-Bīrūnī's book *al-Āthār al-Bāqiyah 'an al-Qurūn al-Khāliyyah* and published it from London in 1879 with the name of *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*. The edition carries a preface consisting ten pages and explanatory notes on certain points in the text.

The preface begins with some preliminary general remarks about the work at hand, followed by a biographical account of the author, and a look into the contents of the book and method and approach of its author. Sachau esteems al-Bīrūnī as a gifted scholar with "modern" methodological approach. At one place, he writes:

With admirable industry the author gathers whatever traditions he can find on every single fact, he confronts them with each other, and inquires with critical acumen into the special merits and demerits of each single tradition.... To speak in general, there is much of the modern spirit and method of critical research in our author.<sup>18</sup>

The above mentioned examples show how the early Western perceptions of the Muslim study of religions were fragmentary, appearing in the form of cursory remarks in prefaces, introductions, forewords, and explanatory notes. These Western scholars rarely give cross-references to the other Muslim works on religions. One could note that in general, these early appraisals of the Muslim study of religions were quite appreciative. As documented above, the editors and translators appear to be fascinated by the objectivity and scholarly vigor of the mediaeval Muslim writers. However, given the fragmentary nature of the early awareness of the Western scholars about different kinds of works on religions contributed by Muslim civilization, apparently these scholars tend to see the positive features of the works

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<sup>17</sup>Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Religionsparteien und Philosophen-Schulen*, trans. Theodor Haarbrüker (Halle: C. A. Schwetschke und Sohn, 1850; reprint, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1969), xi.

<sup>18</sup>Edward Sachau, "Preface," in *The Chronology of Ancient Nations (Al-Athār al-Bāqiyah)*, Abū Rayhān Muḥammad ibn Ahmad al-Bīrūnī (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1879), ix-x.

under their study as exceptional individual cases.<sup>19</sup> In this connection, Sachau proposes a thesis that there was more freedom of expression and intellectual individuality before the establishment of the Islamic orthodoxy for which al-Ghazālī played a key role. In his view, after al-Ghazālī (d.1111), there remained no scope of liberal studies about religions such as carried out by al-Bīrūnī.<sup>20</sup>

## 4.2 Studies on Particular Authors

The ‘introductions, prefaces, and forewords’ phase gradually gave way to a handful of more structured and detailed studies of the works of particular Muslim writers on other religions. The object of study was still an individual work or author but the scope of inquiry was broadened now. The studies falling under this category are not necessarily introductions to edited manuscripts. The important development at this stage is that the studies now draw parallels between the author and/or work under scrutiny and other similar works that appeared in the Muslim cultural history. A brief overview of three selected studies from this category is given below.

Our first author Franz-Elmar Wilms is another writer who has translated, introduced, and interpreted Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī’s (d.505/1111) book *Al-Radd al-Jamīl* (The Apt Refutation), which is a polemical work but draws on original biblical texts to establish its argument. Wilms’ reading of al-Ghazālī’s work is divided into two clusters of chapters. In the first part, he outlines the intellectual biography of al-Ghazālī and translates the text of *Al-Radd al-Jamīl* into German. The second part, which comprises five chapters, is interpretive and analytical. Here, Wilms appraises the contents of book in terms of perceptions of the author about prophets, Jesus, and trinity. Of more importance, however, is the last chapter of this part which compares al-Ghazālī’s apologetic with other similar texts

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<sup>19</sup> See for instance, al-Bīrūnī, *Albernuni's India. An account of the religion, philosophy, literature, geography, chronology, astronomy, customs, laws and astrology of India about A.D. 1030 (with notes and indices. By Dr. Edward C. Sachau)*, xxiv.

<sup>20</sup> Abū Rayhān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī, *Albernuni's India. An account of the religion, philosophy, literature, geography, chronology, astronomy, customs, laws and astrology of India about A.D. 1030 (with notes and indices. By Dr. Edward C. Sachau)*, trans. Edward C. Sachau, 2 vols., vol. 2 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1910), 250.



that appeared in the Muslim history.<sup>21</sup> It is possible to see the difference between such works on the classical Muslim texts about religion and the early editions of the manuscripts. Now, the scholars basically *study* the work in question instead of limiting their task to publication of a legible and error free copy after the comparison of different manuscripts.

The studies of Thomas and Wilms were anyhow related to a particular book. Recently, an interesting book has appeared in German, which discusses the theoretical significance of al-Bīrūnī's work. The book written by Wassilios Klein is entitled *Abu Reyhan Biruni und die Religionen. Eine interkulturelle Perspektive*.<sup>22</sup> The book contains two chapters which are strikingly important for the present undertaking. These chapters are "Islamische Religionswissenschaft?" and "Birunis Religionswissenschaft". The author raises the question, "can there be an Islamic science of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*)?" In answer to this intriguing question, he maintains that in fact the study of religion known as *Religionswissenschaft* has the European cultural background which other cultures do not necessarily share. Even the category religion is a European construction. Thus, he finds Jacques Waardenburg's phrase "scholarly study of religion" more appropriate to refer to the study of different religions by Muslims.<sup>23</sup> Then he undertakes a brief survey of the important mediaeval works on religions written by the Muslim scholars and summarily discusses their approaches. His conclusion is that none of the authors under consideration describes non-Islamic religions for their own sake. The only exception is al-Bīrūnī, and to a lesser degree al-Shahrastānī. However, they, too, seem to be authors of handbooks rather than scientific researchers. Therefore, there hardly exists an Islamic *Religionswissenschaft*. To quote him:

Mann muß sogar sagen, das keiner der genannten Autoren die nichislamischen Religionen um ihrer selbst willen beschrieben hat. Mit einer Ausnahme: Abu Reyhan al-Biruni, dem vielleicht noch al-Shahrastani an die Seite gestellt werden könnte, der allerdings weniger Religionsforscher was als Handbuchautor. Daraus folgt, daß es eine islamische Religionswissenschaft, die Religion als solche und einzelne Religionen um ihrer selbst

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<sup>21</sup>See, Franz-Elmar Wilms, *Al-Ghazālī's Schrift wider die Gottheit Jesu* (Leiden: Brill, 1966).

<sup>22</sup>Klein, *Abu Reyhan Biruni und die Religionen. Eine interkulturelle Perspektive*.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 42-43.

willen erforscht und die weder die Wiederlegung noch eine Theologie der Religionen aus islamischer Sicht zum Ziel hat, nicht gab.<sup>24</sup>

One may or may not agree with this conclusion, but it is evident from the nature of questions raised here that the Western reception of the classical Muslim works on religions has entered by now into a new phase, in which a work under scrutiny is discussed as a part of continuous disciplinary traditions instead of an isolated example.

### **4.3 Systematic Studies**

At the third stage, the Western perceptions of the Muslim study of religions culminate in a cluster of systematic interpretations or historical surveys of the classical as well as contemporary Muslim contributions to the study of religion. These studies are systematic in the sense that instead of dealing with one particular author, they are organized with reference to subject matter, period, or region and cover a range of authors. It seems plausible to distinguish within this category two types of the studies. Firstly, comprehensive studies that venture to make an overall sense of the Muslim study of religions such as undertaken by Jacques Waardenburg and Patrice C Brodeur. Secondly, studies that are fractional in the sense that they focus on the Muslim approaches to religion with reference to a particular region, era, or a religious tradition such carried out by Steven M. Wasserstrom, Camilla Adang, and Bruce B. Lawrence.

#### **4.3.1 Fractional Studies**

##### **4.3.1.1 Steven M. Wasserstrom: Muslim Heresiography of Jews and the Islamicate History of Religions**

Let us begin with Steven M. Wasserstrom<sup>25</sup> who studies the dynamics of Jewish-Muslim coexistence under early Islam and the Muslim approaches to other religions, particularly Judaism. In this regard, his earliest contribution known to us is a doctoral thesis on history of the ‘Muslim Heresiography of Jews’ which he wrote at the University of

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 50.

<sup>25</sup> He is Moe and Izetta Tonkon Professor of Judaic Studies and Humanities at Reed College, Portland, Oregon.

Toronto in 1986.<sup>26</sup> Then, he published an interesting review article in 1988 about three new translations of al-Shahrastānī's *al-milal wa al-niḥal*. The article appeared with a thought provoking title of "Islamicate History of Religions?"<sup>27</sup> Then in the mid of 1990s, he published a seminal book *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam*<sup>28</sup> in which he looks, among other things, at the emergence of the study of religion from the perspective of symbiosis between Muslim and Jewish tradition under early Islam during the "Islamicate" renaissance, which thrived from ninth to eleventh centuries. Afterwards, he continued to publish occasionally on the Muslim perceptions of Judaism.<sup>29</sup>

Wasserstrom maintains that early Muslim scholars created comparative religions for a variety of purposes; historical, doctrinal, jurisprudential, and so on. In the course of their comparative studies and heresiographies, these Muslim scholars relied on a range of foreign sources and sometimes even gathered information from "native" informants. The works thus produced are, therefore, an important source on religious history and a valuable resource for the study of methods used by the best informed pre-modern historians of religions.<sup>30</sup> Wasserstrom finds that the medieval Muslim writings are the best source on the history of

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<sup>26</sup>Steven Mark Wasserstrom, "Species of Misbelief: A History of Muslim Heresiography of the Jews" (University of Toronto, 1986).

<sup>27</sup>Wasserstrom, "Islamicate History of Religions?."

<sup>28</sup>Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>29</sup> Two book chapters published by him are the case in point here. Firstly, Steven M. Wasserstrom, "Heresiography of the Jews in Mamluk Times," in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, ed. Jacques Waardenburg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Secondly, Steven M. Wasserstrom, "Jewish Sectarianism in the Near East: A Muslim's Account," in *Judaism in Practice: From the Middle Ages Through the Early Modern Period*, ed. Lawrence Fine (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> See "Thesis Abstract" in Wasserstrom, "Species of Misbelief: A History of Muslim Heresiography of the Jews". Unfortunately, the present scribe was able to acquire only a twenty four pages preview of this dissertation which included abstract, table of contents, and few pages of introduction. The "Thesis Abstract" at the Beginning is not paginated.

quasi Jewish sects like *ʿĪsāwiyya*.<sup>31</sup> He applauds al-Shahrastānī as “the greatest of all premodern historians of religions.”<sup>32</sup> By the way of conclusion to this article, Wasserstrom goes on to say:

However much work has been done, Islamicate history of religions, epitomized by *Milal*, remains a largely unexplored resource of the study of world religions. This point is true, not only in term of *Milal*’s contribution of sheer data, but, even more important, because of its implications for the history and philosophy of the history of religions. Islamicate history of religions was broadly unsurpassed in all of premodern intellectual endeavors in the breadth and relative sophistication of its studies of other religions.<sup>33</sup>

Wasserstrom sees the emergence of comparative religion during the Islamicate renaissance in the context of mutual intellectual challenges posed to different religious groups which lived under the aegis of Islamic political order. No doubt, Sunnīs were the majority group with control over the centers of power. However, the confrontation between opposing groups having divergent, well established, and seriously defended doctrines was a matter of routine. In comparison with other religious groups, Shīʿīs and Jews were closest to Sunnīs in theory and practice. Ironically, this closeness meant the greatest danger to the self-understanding of the Sunnīs. However, as these three groups were internally diverse, certain individuals belonging to

various subgroups could find those of other subgroups occasionally to be congenial, if not receptive, to the personal and intellectual overtures. In this way, the “vast imperium” of Islamic civilization engendered pluralistic contacts, which in turn simulated pluralistic approaches to the study of religions. Out of oppositional relations a certain comparativism arose.<sup>34</sup>

In this connection, he makes another interesting observation. For practical purposes, such as to legislate and apply *aḥkāṁ ahl al-dhimma* (ordinances concerning the

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid. For a detailed account of this Jewish sect see, Steven M. Wasserstrom, “The ʿĪsāwiyya Revisited,” *Studia Islamica* 75 (1992): 57-80.

<sup>32</sup>Wasserstrom, “Islamicate History of Religions?,” 405.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.: 411.

<sup>34</sup>Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam*, 136.

protected people) to the right category, Islamicate civilization required a careful classification of the religious communities living under its control. Thus, he concludes that the Islamicate history of religions may be viewed “as a function of domination of the Islamicate civilization over the “others” within its cultural purview.”<sup>35</sup> One can note striking similarity of the above view with that of Edward Said’s explanation of “orientalism” with reference to colonialism.

Wasserstrom’s unequivocal rating of the classical Muslim scholars’ work and their methods as a part of the world history of the study of religion asks for some observations. He does not clearly distinguish what types of Muslim works from a wide range of genres make up the pre-modern part of the worldwide discipline of history of religions. However, his borrowing of the notion of ‘Islamicate’ from Marshall Hodgson can be taken as implying that Wasserstrom is not referring to the bulk of disputative works written exclusively in a polemical framework. This can be deduced because the Islamicate history is distinguishable from the Islamic history in that the former refers to broader cultural conditions that emerged under the Islamic empires but carried a host of foreign influences. As a matter of implication, then, the ‘Islamicate history of religions’ apparently refers to those elucidations of religions which were not by definition confined to the Islamic confessionism.

Another point to be made is that Wasserstrom’s recognition of the Muslim scholars’s writings as a part of global history of religious studies also reveals his understanding of this discipline. This becomes obvious as at one place where he refers to the Islamicate history of religions as a branch of the theological sciences of Islam.<sup>36</sup> These remarks make it abundantly clear that Wasserstrom does not consider it necessary to distinguish the discipline of religious studies from theology in very strict terms.

#### **4.3.1.2 Camilla Adang: Muslim Writers on Judaism and Hebrew Bible: Ibn Ḥazm and His Predecessors**

Camilla Adang is another scholar whose work on the Muslim studies of other religions is systematic. The area of her focus is the medieval Muslim writers on Judaism. She

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<sup>35</sup>Wasserstrom, "Islamicate History of Religions?," 410-11.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.: 409.

undertook Islamic and Judaic studies at the University of Nijmegen and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Later on she became associated with Tel Aviv University where she has been teaching Muslim-Jewish coexistence, Muslim history and the religion of Islam. She has published on Ibn Ḥazm's polemics against Judaism and on the other medieval Muslim writers on Judaism and Hebrew Bible. Since she is based in Israel which is not one of the geographical regions typically considered as the "West", it needs some justification to take up her work under the heading of Western perceptions. Two considerations give good reason for inclusion of her name in the present undertaking. Firstly, both her education and research work has been carried out partly in Europe and she has been working in collaboration with the European scholarly community.<sup>37</sup> Secondly, some contemporary Muslim scholars have viewed the work of Israeli scholars as an annexure to, or simply a part of the orientalist scholarship.<sup>38</sup>

One of her main contributions on the subject under discussion is the book *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* which saw the light of the day in 1996.<sup>39</sup> The seven chapters of the book can be divided into two clusters. The first four chapters give an account of the earliest receptions of Bible in Islam (chapter one), introduce the selected authors<sup>40</sup> and their work in chronological order (chapter two), analyze the Muslim awareness of Jewish beliefs and practices (chapter three), and discuss the availability and use of Biblical materials by the Muslim writers (chapter four). The second cluster of chapters discusses three major issues which have been source of controversy between the Jewish and Muslim traditions throughout their shared history. These issues are

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<sup>37</sup> See "Preface" in Jacques Waardenburg, ed., *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), vii.

<sup>38</sup> Muhammad Jalāl Idrīs, *Al-Istishrāq al-Isrā'īlī fī al-Masādir al-'ibriyyah*, (Cairo: Al-'Arab, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> As mentioned above she has authored another book in Spanish on Ibn Ḥazm's polemic against Jews. The present study does not take this book into account because I do not understand Spanish.

<sup>40</sup> These authors are 'Alī b. Rabban al-Tabarī (194/810-251/865), 'Abd Allāh b. Muslim b. Qutayba (213/828-276/889), Aḥmad b. Abī Ya'qūb famous as al-Ya'qūbī (d. 292/905), Abū Ja'afar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Tabarī (224 or 225/839-310/923), Abū 'I-Ḥasan 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mas'ūdī (280/893-345/956), Abū Nasr Mutahhar b. Tāhir al-Maqqdisī (d.355/966), Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Tyyib al-Bāqilāni (338/950-403/1013), Abū 'I Rayḥān

the proofs of prophethood (chapter five), the abrogation of the Mosaic Law (chapter six), and the question of the authenticity of Jewish scriptures (chapter seven). The chapters are internally organized with reference to the selected author.<sup>41</sup> This brief overview of the contents and organization of the book shows that it combines historical and thematic dimensions of the subject matter.

The main thrust of Adang's study seems to be appraisal of Ibn Ḥazm's work and approach to Bible and Judaism vis-à-vis other Muslim writers who preceded him. She seeks to establish if Ibn Ḥazm was following a tradition or departing from it. In this regard, she concludes that although Ibn Ḥazm's knowledge of Bible was unprecedented but the comparison with other authors shows that his general knowledge of Judaism was less of an exception.<sup>42</sup> However his objective was clearly polemic contrary to some other important Muslim authors.

Adang's approach is mainly historical and she does not seem tempted to propose totalizing theories with regard to the entire range of Muslim writings on Judaism which she takes up for study. However, she makes the following general observation which is of interest for us:

The interest in Judaism was part of a growing intersect in the religions and cultures that could be encountered within the boundaries of the Islamic empire and beyond. Similar descriptions are given of other religions, and Judaism was not treated any differently from, say, Christianity or Zoroastrianism. By including discussion of contemporary Judaism, al-Ya'qubi, al-Maqdisi and al-Biruni accorded this religion a place among the great cultures of their own period, and their example shows that Muslim discussions of Judaism need not automatically be polemical.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, Adang draws another general conclusion that each of the important Muslim writers on Judaism in his own way shows ambivalent attitude towards Bible. She views that

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Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī (362/973-442-1050-'51), and Abū Muḥammad 'Alī b. Aḥmad b. Ḥazm (384/994-456/1064)

<sup>41</sup>The first introductory chapter is an exception.

<sup>42</sup>Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm*, 252.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

this ambivalence stems from the Qur'an which ascertains the divine revelation of Torah - and that it (Torah) confirms the prophethood of Muhammad - on the one hand and declares that Jews and Christians have corrupted their scriptures on the other.<sup>44</sup>

It is important to note that Adang is not well known as a theorist or historian of the study of religion. This observation means that while evaluating the works of selected Muslim authors on Judaism, Adang does not frame her study in the wider context of discipline of religious studies. More explicitly, she does not seem to be considering the question how the Muslim writers' work on religions can be understood in the context of the developments and problems of the contemporary discipline of religious studies. Thus, undoubtedly her undertaking is significant from the pure historical point of view, but it does not, and is not supposed to, illuminate us much as far the broader questions about encounters of scholarly traditions in the study of religions are concerned.

#### **4.3.1.3 Bruce B. Lawrence: Muslim Study of Hinduism from al-Bīrūnī to al-Shahrastānī**

Bruce B. Lawrence<sup>45</sup> is another scholar whose views need to be discussed here. His interest regarding the topic under discussion is the Muslim study of Hinduism. He has contributed a book length study on al-Shahrastānī's (1086–1153) understanding of Indian religions in addition to at least one journal article focusing on al-Shahrastānī's view of the Indian Idol worship.<sup>46</sup> He has also published on al-Bīrūnī's approach to Indian religion and culture<sup>47</sup>, and on his use of the Hindu religious texts.<sup>48</sup> Apart from writing on these two

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<sup>44</sup>Camilla Adang, "Medieval Muslim Polemics against the Jewish Scriptures," in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, ed. Jacques Waardenburg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 153.

<sup>45</sup>He got PhD in History of Religions from YaleUniversity in 1972. His academic interests are quite diverse including, but not limited to, comparative study of religious movements; Institutional Islam; Muslim study of Indian religion and culture; Indo-Persian Sufism; Contemporary Islam as Abrahamic Faith and Religious Ideology. Presently, he is the Carnegie scholar on Islam at department of religion, DukeUniversity. See his webpage, "Bruce B. Lawrence," [http://www.duke.edu/web/muslimnets/mcw\\_bio/bruce/index.htm](http://www.duke.edu/web/muslimnets/mcw_bio/bruce/index.htm).

<sup>46</sup>Lawrence, *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions*, Bruce B. Lawrence, "Shahrastānī on Indian Idol Worship," *Studia Islamica* 38 (1973).

<sup>47</sup>Bruce B. Lawrence, "al-Bīrūnī's Approach to the Comparative Study of Indian Culture," *Studies in Islam* 11, no. 1 (1978).



mediaeval Muslim scholars, he has also studied Sufism in the context of history of religions.<sup>49</sup>

Lawrence's appraisal of al-Bīrūnī's *India* combines elements of textual analysis, source criticism, and sociology of knowledge. According to him, the structure of al-Bīrūnī's *India* mirrors his methodology. The Preface and Introduction of the book give an impression as if the book contains exclusively ethnographic or religious data. This is not the case, however. Roughly only 22 out of 70 chapters of the book pertain to religion and philosophy. The remaining chapters are about different branches of sciences, grammar, mathematics, astrology and so on. This is probably because al-Bīrūnī hoped that the material on religion and philosophy would provide more useful information for his readers in their anticipated interaction with Indian people. This view is supported by the fact that he draws parallels from familiar Greek, Persian, Christian, Jewish, and Sufi sources to make the Indian outlook understandable for the educated Muslims. Another issue is the disjunction between philosophy and religion implied in the organization of the book. The first 12 chapters deal with philosophy or doctrines and then 10 of the last 17 chapters discuss religion or rituals. This scheme is in line with the Muslim mindset in which faith or doctrinal issues precede practice or rituals.<sup>50</sup>

Lawrence acknowledges that al-Bīrūnī was faced with a host of problems in his endeavor to get at the reliable and authentic information about Indian religion and culture. The hindrances included the language barrier and general Hindu aversion towards Muslims for political reasons. In the face of such difficulties, al-Bīrūnī gleaned and presented a mountain of information about Hindu religion and culture. It seems that the primary sources

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<sup>48</sup> Bruce B. Lawrence, "The use of Hindu Religious Texts in al al-Bīrūnī's *India* with Special Reference to Patanjali's Yoga-Sutras," in *The Scholar and the Saint: Studies in Commemoration of Abu'l-Rayhan al-Bīrūnī and Jalal al-Dīn al Rūmī*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1975).

<sup>49</sup> See Bruce B. Lawrence, "Sufism and the History of Religions," *Studies in Islam* 18, no. 1-2 (1981), Bruce B. Lawrence, "Al-Bīrūnī and Islamic Mysticism " in *Al-Bīrūnī Commemorative Volume : Proceedings of the International Congress held in Pakistan on the occasion of Millenary of Abū Raihān Muhammad ibn Ahmad Al-Bīrūnī (973-ca 1051 A.D.), November 26, 1973 thru' December 12, 1973*, ed. Hakim Mohammad Said (Karachi: Hamdard National Foundation, Pakistan, 1979).

<sup>50</sup> See Lawrence, "al-Bīrūnī's Approach to the Comparative Study of Indian Culture," 2-3.

of his information were Sanskrit texts and pundits with whom he used to have personal contacts. Lawrence surmises: "It appears that the *pundits* read him texts which he then transliterated into Arabic/Persian script, and later translated with the help of these same *pundits*."<sup>51</sup>

Another intriguing observation by Lawrence is regarding al-Bīrūnī's categories employed in his *India*. The Later presented Indian thought by utilizing the categories of his own culture, such as the Muslim concept of universal God as a transcendent being. At this point Lawrence makes an important observation regarding methodological foundation of al-Bīrūnī's study of other religions:

Is it not, however, an expansive view of the Muslim concept of God, one which affirms His universality so deeply that His presence is located in the structure not only of Greek but also of Hindu belief? The integrity and persistence to search out the One among the Many marks al-Bīrūnī as a pioneer in formulating methodological approaches to the study of non-Muslim religions.<sup>52</sup>

Taking the cue from this observation about al-Bīrūnī, it may be pointed out that the observation concerning expansion of the Muslim categories to understand other religions applies equally well to Muslim writers on religions in general. This aspect of the Muslim scholarly tradition is epitomized in the present dissertation with the phrasal expression 'self without'.

Lawrence's book *Shahrastānī on Indian Religions* is a meticulous examination into the approach and methodology of al-Shahrastānī in the study of different religions. The book pertains to a systematic textual and contextual analysis of the final section of part II of al-Shahrastānī's book *al-Milal wa al-Nihal*. This section is called '*Ārā' al-hind*', which literally means 'views from India'. Right away in the beginning of the book, he observes that al-Shahrastānī's description in this section illuminates us little about the history of Indian religions. However, the sub-chapter on Buddhism is an exception as it contains some factual data which is not available in any other medieval source. In the

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid.: 5. See also p.4. See also, Lawrence, "The use of Hindu Religious Texts in al al-Bīrūnī's *India* with Special Reference to Patanjali's Yoga-Sutras."

<sup>52</sup>Lawrence, "al-Bīrūnī's Approach to the Comparative Study of Indian Culture," 6.

final analysis of Lawrence, the importance of al-Shahrastānī does not lie in “reportorial scope as a historian but his analytical skill as a theologian.”<sup>53</sup> Part of this observation is valid. Al-Shahrastānī’s account of Indian religions was trivial and not free from misunderstandings. However, it can be argued that al-Shahrastānī does not stand tall among the scholars of his time because of his theological acumen. On the contrary, he is esteemed for pioneering the descriptive approach to religions and to a lesser degree for his innovative classification of religions of his time.

Comparing the approaches of al-Bīrūnī and al-Shahrastānī to Indian religion and culture, Lawrence makes interesting observations. He points out that in comparison with al-Bīrūnī, al-Shahrastānī’s information about India were second- or even third-hand and his approach was exclusively theological. Therefore, his work is insignificant for a contemporary student of the religious history of ancient India. However, in one respect both al-Bīrūnī and al-Shahrastānī faced the same fate, that is, they did not leave behind a competent successor to continue the task which they had started.<sup>54</sup>

#### 4.3.1.4 David Thomas: The Study of Polemics against Christianity

David Thomas has studied Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq’s (9<sup>th</sup> century) polemics against Christianity. Although polemics and studies on polemics fall out of the scope of present study, Thomas’ study deserves to be mentioned here, firstly, because he has himself conceded that al-Warrāq’s work was not limited to polemics. Through a painstaking examination of quotations in a host of medieval Muslim texts on different sects and religions, and cross-references found in these texts, he shows that a lost work of al-Warrāq named *KitābMaqālāt al-Nāss* (The Book of Peoples’ Opinions) was descriptive and non-polemic. In his words, “it appears that the *Maqālāt* was comprehensive description of some of the major religious traditions known in the early Islamic period.”<sup>55</sup> Secondly, because his study contains a treasure of information about the milieu in which works on other religions like the one by al-

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<sup>53</sup>Lawrence, *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions*, 7.

<sup>54</sup>Lawrence, "Shahrastānī on Indian Idol Worship," 72.

<sup>55</sup>David Thomas, "Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq and the History of Religions," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 61, no. 2 (1996): 283.

Warrāq were being written. Thus, his study sheds light on the background of classical Muslim works on religions in general.

Thomas has published two books on al-Warrāq's *al-Radd 'alā Thlāth Firaq min al-Nasārā* (Refutation of the Three Christian Sects). The first one appeared in 1992 under the title *Anti Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's "Against Trinity"*, which was in fact the study and translation of the first part of the above mentioned book of al-Warrāq.<sup>56</sup> He published the second book in 2002 with the title *Anti Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Incarnation"*,<sup>57</sup> which is the study and translation of the second part of *al-Radd 'alā Thlāth Firaq min al-Nasārā*. He has also published articles on the topic under discussion.<sup>58</sup> His contribution is certainly different from the earlier introductions to edited manuscripts. For instance, *Anti Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's "Against Trinity"* consists of a detailed study of the subject matter divided into four chapters namely: "Early Islamic Theological Investigations", "Abū 'Īsā's Life and Thought", "Early Islamic Refutations of Christianity", and "The Structure and Contents of *al-Radd 'alā al-Nasārā*".

Concerning the question as to what kind of intentions of the early Muslim authors may have been, Thomas quotes the well-known French historian of the Muslim study of religions, Guy Monnot who thinks it was the curiosity for "the other". Thomas, finds this explanation only partly true at least in case of al-Warrāq who exhibits a great interest in Shī'ism in his writings. However, in spite of this observation, Thomas highly appreciates the scholarship of al-Warrāq, especially as displayed in his book *KitābMaqālāt al-Nāss*. To quote him:

Its descriptive objectivity singles out the *KitābMaqālāt al-Nāss* as an extraordinarily unusual work which can justifiably be called one of the first Islamic histories of religion. While it may have exemplified the flowering of religious and intellectual self-confidence of early Abbasid

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<sup>56</sup>Thomas, ed., *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity: Abū 'Īsa al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"*.

<sup>57</sup>Thomas, ed., *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity: Abū 'Īsa al-Warrāq's "Against the Incarnation"*.

<sup>58</sup> For instance, David Thomas, "The Bible in Early Muslim Anti-Christian Polemic," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7, no. 1 (1996), David Thomas, "The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Abbasid Era," in *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*, ed. Lolyd Ridgeon (Surrey: Curzon, 2001).

times, it remains a work of singular insight whose author is revealed as a most independently minded inquirer into all forms of truth.<sup>59</sup>

Generally, Thomas opines that possible motivation for Muslim authors to write about other religions was the famous *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet Muhammad predicts that Jews and Christians were divided into seventy-one and seventy-two sects, but his own community will be divided into seventy three sects, from which only one will be saved. According to him this *ḥadīth* was certainly the guiding structural principle in the works of al-Baghdādī (d.1037) and al-Shahrastānī.<sup>60</sup> If his judgment is correct, and it seems to be the case, it supports the main hypothesis of the present dissertation that Muslims study and classification of different Muslim sects and non-Muslim religions in a single genre called *al-Milal wa al-Nihal* can be seen an expression of the Muslim self understanding in relation to Others of different kind.

#### **4.3.2 Comprehensive Studies**

Under this category fall the studies by Jacques Waardenburg and Patrice C. Brodeur. Below is an overview of their work with some observations at the end.

##### **4.3.2.1 Jacques Waardenburg: A Survey of the Muslim Perceptions of other Religions**

Jacques Waardenburg is perhaps the most prolific writer on the theme of Muslim study of other religions. Already a known historian of the study of religion in general,<sup>61</sup> he turned his attention to the study of religions in the Muslim context since 1990s. This shift of focus is evident from the titles of contributions which he made during and after this decade. He delivered a conference paper entitled: "Muslim Notions of Religion as Manifested in the

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<sup>59</sup>Thomas, "Abū 'Īsa al-Warrāq and the History of Religions," 289-90.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.: 284-85.

<sup>61</sup> The most important of his contributions on the history of study of religion are Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: Aims, Methods and Theories of Research*, Jacques Waardenburg, "The Problem of Representing Religions and Religion: Phenomenology of Religion in the Netherlands 1918-1939," in *Religionswissenschaft und Kulturkritik*, ed. Hans G. Kippenberg & Brigitte Luchesi (Marburg: diagonal-Verlag, 1991).

Interreligious Discourse” in 1994.<sup>62</sup> The next year his edited volume *Scholarly Approaches to Religion, Interreligious Perceptions and Islam* appeared.<sup>63</sup> Soon after in 1998, he wrote an article in which he surveyed the state of religious studies in important Muslim countries.<sup>64</sup> The same year he wrote a thick volume on the Christian-Muslim mutual perceptions since the mid-twentieth century.<sup>65</sup> The next year his *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey* appeared, which is the most comprehensive book on its theme to date. Though an edited volume, it includes about one hundred pages introduction by Waardenburg in which he reviews and comments on virtually every worth mentioning work on different religions written by Muslim scholars throughout their cultural history ending up to the present times. This hallmark work was followed by yet another edited volume in year 2003 namely *Muslims and Others: Relations in Context*. More recently, he has written *Muslims as Actors: Islamic Meanings and the Muslim Interpretations in the Perspective of the Study of Religions*. The above list of titles is a clear indication of the significance of his contributions on the topic under discussion.

Let us begin with Waardenburg’s survey of the “Muslim perceptions of other religions,” which he wrote as an introduction to his edited volume entitled: *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*. This historical survey is divided into the early (610-650), mediaeval (650-1500), modern (1500-1950), and contemporary (1950-1995) periods. The survey begins with the Qur’anic view of other religions, especially Judaism and Christianity. According to Waardenburg, the Qur’anic statements about Jews and Christians come from a period when Islam had not yet crystallized into a complete and “fulfilled”

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<sup>62</sup>Jacques Waardenburg, "Muslim Notions of Religion as Manifested in Interreligious Discourse," in *The Notion of "religion" in Comparative Research: Selected Proceedings of the XVIth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (Rome, 3rd-8th September, 1990)*, ed. Ugo Bianchi (Rome: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 1994).

<sup>63</sup>Jacques Waardenburg, ed., *Scholarly Approaches to Religion, Interreligious Perceptions and Islam*, Studia Religiosa Helvetica Jahrbuch (Bern: Peter Lang, 1995).

<sup>64</sup>Jacques Waardenburg, "Observations on the Scholarly Study of Religions as Pursued in Some Muslim Countries," *Numen* 45, no. 3 (1998).

<sup>65</sup>Jacques Waardenburg, *Islam and Christianity: Mutual Perceptions Since the Mid-20th Century* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998).

religion. Therefore, the Qur'anic text should be seen primarily as a growing debate with Jews and Christians and a response to their practices that existed during the lifetime of Muhammad.<sup>66</sup> Thus bringing down the discussion to historical developments, he maintains that the encounter with other religious communities played a vital role in Muhammad's prophetic preaching and founding of a new faith community. This encounter took place in three stages:

[T]he new religious movement presented itself successively in at least three principal ways: as a religious purification movement of polytheism, as a religious reform movement of Judaism and Christianity, and as the proclamation of the true universal monotheistic religion in its Arabian form with a complete sociopolitical order.<sup>67</sup>

Interestingly, Waardenburg connects these three successive stages with the Qur'anic expressions of *hanaftiyya*, *millat Ibrāhīm* and *dīn al-haqq* respectively. It is, however, debatable if these Qur'anic notions can be understood as referring to three distinct developmental stages of Islam. Besides the Qur'an uses the first two terms together to refer to a single concept and not two different concepts. (Qur'an 2: 135)

Waardenburg views that apparently the sociopolitical factors played quite important role in Muhammad's dealings with other religious communities. However on a closer look one would find that the encounters with other religious communities took place on two different levels: a maneuvering of the affairs on sociopolitical level and an actualization of the religious ideals inspired by particular prophetic revelations. He concludes that in a similar fashion, Muslim interaction with other religious traditions after Muhammad's death can and should be understood as being governed by sociopolitical developments and religious considerations simultaneously.<sup>68</sup>

After elaborating such foundational issues essential to the Muslim perceptions of other religions, the survey enters into what Waardenburg calls the medieval period, that is from the mid of the sixth to the end of fifteenth centuries CE. He notes that in contrast with the European history, medieval Muslim scholars showed interest in religions of other

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<sup>66</sup>Waardenburg, ed., *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, 9.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 15-16.

civilizations. However, this acknowledgment is watered down in the same paragraph by putting quotation marks on their “study of religions”, apparently implying skepticism. Then, he notes that certain limitations hampered study of religions at that time. What is interesting from the standpoint of the present undertaking is that our author counts the then prevalent views about life and world as a limitation with regard to study of religions because these views were both “Islamic” and “medieval.” By the way of conclusion to the introductory section of this chapter, Waardenburg goes on to state:

On the whole, any Muslim interest in non-Muslims, their ideas and practices, seems to have been practical rather than inquisitive. This outlook was culturally renounced since Muslims at the time saw others from their own vantage point of being “lords of the two worlds” who had very little to learn from others.<sup>69</sup>

This is how the initial remarks about the medieval Muslim interest in other religions are virtually nullified at the end.

Then, Waardenburg distinguishes seven main attitudes toward other religions which developed in the medieval Islamic civilization: 1) no curiosity or interest in knowing about other religions; 2) suspicion or mistrust about the new converts whose beliefs and thoughts were perceived as a potential source of the heretic tendencies; 3) interest in knowing different “sects” - and by extension different religions - in order to refute their falsehood; 4) a positive interest in foreign religions found among some converts who continued to appreciate their previous religions; 5) considering all good and true elements in other religions and cultures already present in Islam, so wherever positive values exist they are essentially “Islamic” ; 6) a public interest in geography and history of the world including religious information, thus here and there existed educated Muslims who recognized the plurality of religions as a historical reality; 7) existence of some mystic tendencies in which universality of divine revelation was accepted, a conviction which provided foundation for positive attitude towards other religions and cultures.<sup>70</sup> This elucidation of attitudes is comprehensive and plausible to a large measure. It may be noted that the second through fifth delineated attitudes hint at the Muslim

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 20-21.



perception of self in relation to the Other. Waardenburg, however, does not propose a clear interpretive scheme using the self-Other dialectics.

Waardenburg draws an important conclusion that the earliest interest in other religions is found among those who were in some sense outside the established religious system. He instantiates this point with the examples of al-Nawbakhtī (d. 912), Ibn Bābuwayh (d. 1001), and the alleged Shī'ī sympathizers such as al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153) and Abu al-Ma'ālī (who wrote his book in 1092), and certain doctrines of Ikhwān al-Safā' (10<sup>th</sup> c.) and the Ismā'īlīs. We have already given consideration to this possibility in the previous chapter and find this contention implausible. For one thing, most of the important writers on other religions - including those three whom Waardenburg considers forerunners of the modern study of religion<sup>71</sup> - can be convincingly seen as “*within* the established religious system.” There is no question about the orthodoxy of Ibn Ḥazm or al-Bīrūnī. Al-Shahrastānī is an acknowledged follower of the mainstream Ash'arī school of theology. Doubts about his alleged sympathy with shī'ism are based on far-fetched speculations and have already been convincingly refuted by esteemed historians.<sup>72</sup> However, it would be more plausible to view that important contributions to the study of other religions were made by those writers who had had exposure to different religious or cultural traditions and who happened to live in culturally plural diverse societies. For instance, Ibn Ḥazm lived in the Muslim Spain which was a religiously and ethnically plural society. Al-Bīrūnī had lived in India. Both al-Shahrastānī and Abū'l Mu'ālī come from Persia which had greater contacts with Indian, Central Asian and Chinese culture than the Arabian Peninsula.

After giving an account of the available sources of medieval Muslim perceptions of other religions, Waardenburg discusses the contribution of four important scholars concerned with the study of religions from this period, namely Ibn Ḥazm, al-Bīrūnī, al-Shahrastānī, and Abū'l Mu'ālī. Again in the beginning of this section one finds him acknowledging that: “Medieval Muslim authors gave some very interesting accounts of others religions....three of [them] have acquired a reputation beyond the borders of Islam

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 25.

<sup>72</sup> See, Lawrence, *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions*, 13-14. See also Shiblī Num'ānī, *Al-Kalām aur 'Ilm al-Kalām*

itself and may be considered as forerunners of the modern study of religions.”<sup>73</sup> Similarly, he notes that one common aspect of the four selected authors is the use of reason as instrument of inquiry. They refrain from spiritualizing their studies of other religions and do not succumb to mystic, Gnostic or speculative tendencies. In this connection, he remarks: “This view of reason seems to me to be a firm point of departure in the study of other religions and comparative religions in general.”<sup>74</sup>

Waardenburg’s treatment of the Muslim perceptions of other religions in the modern and contemporary periods is important. Because even today there are only a few studies available on this topic. In an article entitled: “Observations on the scholarly study of religions as pursued in some Muslim countries”, he presents a bird’s eye view of the institutional framework of the study of religion in different Muslim countries today as well as the approaches to religion and problem faced in this pursuit. He notes that most of the books on religions other than Islam appearing in the Muslim countries are polemical and apologetic and start with premises that Islam is the only true and final religion. There are, however, a few books which are descriptive and give judgement only at the end by using rational argument.<sup>75</sup> Drawing an analogy between the European and Muslim civilization with regard to the beginning of the study of religion, he maintains that just as the European scholars draw inspiration from the great movements in their cultural history like Renaissance, Enlightenment and Romanticism, why not the Mediaeval scholars such as al-Bīrūnī’s and al-Shahrastānī can inspire the Muslim scholars for the study of religion. He candidly holds that the Western model in the study of religion can be a catalyst in this regard but it need not be followed as authority.<sup>76</sup>

Mention has already been made of a special conference of the IAHR held in Marburg in 1988. The purpose was to inquire into the ideological constraints on the study of religion in various parts of the world including the Muslim world. At this occasion, Waardenburg pointed out three cardinal differences in the situation of religious studies in the Muslim world

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<sup>73</sup>Waardenburg, ed., *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, 25.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>75</sup>Waardenburg, "Observations on the Scholarly Study of Religions as Pursued in Some Muslim Countries," 239.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*: 246.

compared to Europe and North America: 1) Religion is still a source of identity in the Middle East and therefore impartial study of religion is hardly conceivable 2) Religious studies is seen by many Muslims as implying the Judaeo-Christian or Western liberalism and capitalism and thus inimical to Islam 3) Most Muslim Intellectuals tend to identify the religious studies as “Orientalism” with the purpose to defend Western civilization against Islam.<sup>77</sup>

Waardenburg’s appraisal of the Muslim study of religion is thorough and insightful. His numerous studies on the topic are characterized by collection of data, diligent classifications and moderate observations. To some extent, his analyses show signs of reflexivity and openness toward the academic dialogue. His observations appear to be informed of the reservations which usually the Muslim intelligentsia expresses about the Western scholarship or known commonly in the Muslim world as orientalism. Having said all that, it is observed here that he seems to be caught in a dilemma. He seems to be sympathetic to the scholarly tradition which he is writing about but at the same time loath to deviate from the idealized standards of the European academic tradition to which he belongs. It is not difficult to notice that in spite of the meticulously undertaken survey, his observations are based on the taken for granted academic ideals which are not necessarily endorsed by the tradition under scrutiny. For example, he appreciates the use of reason by four important Muslim writers from the mediaeval period but observes that their interest in religions was not exclusively for the sake of knowledge.<sup>78</sup> This observation presumes two academic standards: the use of reason and that the interest in other religions should be exclusively for the sake of knowledge. Now, taking a cue from al-Bīrūnī’s discussion in the preface of his *magnumopus* on Indian religions and culture, what is crucial in Muslim intellectual tradition is the accuracy of description. It is not considered a prerequisite for an academic undertaking to cordon itself off from any practical purposes or motives.<sup>79</sup> In sum, it appears that Waardenburg’s appraisal of the Muslim studies or perceptions of other religions

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<sup>77</sup> See, Peter Antes et al, "Religious Studies in the Context of Islamic Culture," in *Margurg Revisited: Institutions and Strategies in the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Pye (Marburg: diagonal-Verlag, 1989), 150.

<sup>78</sup> Waardenburg, *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, 31.

<sup>79</sup> One may not forget here that one of the Muslim supplications reads “Oh God! I take refuge in you from useless knowledge.”

does not aim at bridging the gap between etic and emic standpoints with regard to the Muslim and Western academic traditions. It is as if one academic tradition is judging the other instead of engaging it in dialogue.

#### 4.3.2.2 Patrice C. Brodeur: An Interpretation of the Muslim Study of Religions

To the knowledge of this scribe, the author who analyzes the Muslim study of other religions – contemporary as well as classical – more systematically than anyone else is Patrice C. Brodeur. Presently, he works as the *Canada Research Chair on Islam, Pluralism and Globalization* based at the University of Montreal. His broader research focus is two intersecting areas of Islamic studies and religious studies. Within the contexts of pluralism and globalization, he is said to be developing a theory of shared academic space by examining the processes of globalization.<sup>80</sup>

As regards the topic under discussion, his first significant contribution is the doctoral thesis which he completed at the Harvard University in 1999. The thesis is entitled: "From an Islamic Heresiography to an Islamic History of Religions: Modern Arab Muslim Literature on 'Religious Others' with Special Reference to Three Egyptian Authors." The same year he contributed a book chapter entitled: "Arabic Muslim writings on Contemporary Religions other than Islam" in Jacques Waardenburg's edited book *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions*. Two years later, a journal article by him appeared in two parts in which he discussed the changing nature of Islamic studies in the United States and relationship of this discipline to the American religious history. The first part is a sort of survey of literature whereas the second part is more systematic and theoretical in nature. Finally, he contributed another book chapter entitled: "From Postmodernism to 'Glocalism': Toward a Theoretical Understanding of Contemporary Arab Muslim Constructions of Religious Others," in *Globalization and the Muslim World: Culture, Religion, and Modernity*, edited by Birgit Schaebler and Leif Stenberg.

Apparently, his work is not enormous but it should be rated as significant on account of theoretical insights employed and the depth of analysis. Also, the data which he relies on for analysis is quite broad in spectrum and covers synchronic and diachronic dimensions of

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<sup>80</sup>"Chairs: Patrice Brodeur," Canada Chairs,  
[http://www.chairs.gc.ca/web/chairholders/viewprofile\\_e.asp?id=1636](http://www.chairs.gc.ca/web/chairholders/viewprofile_e.asp?id=1636).

the subject matter. In what follows is an overview of the theoretical framework which Brodeur employs to understand the nature of Muslim study of other religions, a summary of his conclusions, and, lastly, some observations on his approach.

To begin with, Brodeur's doctoral thesis systematically interprets the twentieth century Arab Muslim literature on what he calls religious others. He sees this literature both as a continuation of the classical Muslim scholarly tradition and as a response to the intellectual and cultural challenges to which this tradition is exposed after coming into contact with the modern Western civilization. The study takes into account four hundred books on religions other than Islam written by Arab Muslims coming from Egypt, Israel/Philistine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. However the micro analysis is based on three Egyptian scholars, namely 'Adullāh Darāz (1894-1958), Muhammad Abū Zahrah (1898-1974), and Ahmad Shalabī (b. circa 1925). Brodeur is convinced that each of these three writers exemplify different hermeneutical approaches to religions, namely "historics", apologetics, and polemics. The following paragraph in the 'Introduction' gives a succinct outline of the study:

Through an explicit methodology developed in the course of this introduction, I examine this body of texts and their reliance on both older Islamic (chapter 1) and newer Western influences (chapter 2) for the interpretation primarily of Abrahamic and Asian religion. I survey the spectrum of religions described by Arab Muslims as well as their modern categories of perceptions in contrast to those used in the classical period (chapter 3). I then explain those major shifts in hermeneutical boundaries underlying Arab Muslim perception of religion other than Islam (chapter 4). This examination, in turn, throws new light both on the appropriateness of our current academic categories of interpretation for this literature and on the debate over the origins and nature of the academic study of religions (chapter 5). Finally, in the light of this debate, I will raise questions regarding the relative vitality of Western theories of the Other and suggest consequent methodological implications (conclusion).<sup>81</sup>

Theoretically speaking, within the broader perspective of overlapping fields of Islamic Studies, History of Religions, and Western Hermeneutical philosophy, Brodeur develops two key conceptual tools for analysis namely 'differential space' and 'religious others.' The concept of 'differential space' draws on Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of self, Thomas

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<sup>81</sup>Brodeur, "From an Islamic Heresiography to an Islamic History of Religions: Modern Arab Muslim Literature on 'Religious Others' with Special Reference to Three Egyptian Authors", 4.

Bebee's theory of generic instability and Torben Dyrberg's idea of circular structure of power. All of these three theorists base their respective ideas on a relational dynamics instead of static logic. Brodeur maintains that "at the centre of this relational dynamics is what I conceptualize as a 'differential space', an emptiness-between, which is precisely the locus of self/Other identity, generic instability, and power ability."<sup>82</sup> At another place he elaborates that the differential space is like the space between words and letters, which is often invisible but important for the possibility of meaning to occur. The concept of differential space is distinguishable from the Hegelian-Marxist model of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Instead, this concept implies that an identity does not emerge out of the relics of Other, rather it requires existence of Others of different kinds.<sup>83</sup>

Brodeur contends that the notion of 'differential space' provides a useful theoretical foundation for analysis of Arab Muslim works on 'religious others' as this concept allows a distinction between the general and often vague concept of the 'Other' and the specific and potentially less ambiguous concept of 'religious others'. To quote him:

By putting 'Other' in the plural form in the expression 'religious others', I privilege the inevitable diversity of historical existence and hermeneutical readings over a theoretical unity imposed on this plurality when 'Other' is used in the singular. Furthermore, by qualifying the word 'Others' with the adjective 'religious', I distinguish from the general intellectual process of 'othering' in more precise process of what I call 'Identity othering'. In this way, I recognize all 'othering' is rooted in identity of one kind or another.<sup>84</sup>

Given that Brodeur construes the identity as a dynamic and internally diverse concept, he views that the changing borders within the Muslim self mirror the symbiotic nature of the interaction between self and Other.<sup>85</sup> However, it is interaction of the Muslim self with

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 28.

<sup>85</sup>Patrice Brodeur, "Arabic Muslim Writings on Contemporary Religions Other than Islam," in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, ed. Jacques Waardenburg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 240-41.

‘religious others’ that is more directly instrumental in shaping the Muslim scholarship on religions.

Brodeur diligently utilizes the above mentioned conceptual tools for a penetrating analysis of the wide range of polemical, apologetic and historical works about religions produced by Muslim scholars. In a striving to avoid the judgmentally loaded appellations like ‘heresiography’ and ‘polemics’ he devises a peculiar expression ‘generic system of ‘religious others’ to refer to this body of literature. As already mentioned, his project covers synchronic and diachronic dimensions of the subject matter. For the early phase of this learned tradition, he uses the expression ‘formative generic system of ‘religious others.’ By ‘formative’, he wants to point out the foundational role played by this learned tradition in the construction of Islamic identity in the early centuries of the Muslim history. By the ‘generic system’, in turn, he means “a sustained discursive tradition that includes a variety of co-existing and interrelated genres.”<sup>86</sup>

Relying on the work of French scholar Guy Monnot, Brodeur sees the development of this generic system until the eighteenth century in five phases. According to this schema, the Muslim study of religions surfaced in the second Islamic century (eighth century C.E.) with two distinct currents of writings: the polemical writings and the books written out of curiosity about other religions. These two literary currents found expression in three different generic forms, namely refutation, prescription, and description. The third Islamic century (ninth century C.E.) witnessed a development from polemical writings (*kutub al-radd*) to more systematic treatises called *al-maqālāt*. The number of polemical refutations drops down significantly in the fourth Islamic century (tenth century C.E.). The same trend continues to flourish in the fifth Islamic century (eleventh century C.E.), albeit the center of scholarship on religious others shifts to the Persian authors who used to write in Arabic with the only known exception of *Bayān al-Adyān* by Abū’l-Mu‘ālī which is in Persian. The sixth through twelfth Islamic centuries (twelfth to eighteenth centuries C.E.) represent the phase of decline in creative scholarship and no new apologetic or descriptive works appeared.<sup>87</sup> Generally speaking, Brodeur tends to distinguish three types of the Muslim writings on religious others

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<sup>86</sup>Brodeur, "From an Islamic Heresiography to an Islamic History of Religions: Modern Arab Muslim Literature on 'Religious Others' with Special Reference to Three Egyptian Authors", 2.

<sup>87</sup> See Ibid., 36.

that appeared until the eighteenth century: descriptive or historical studies, prescriptive or apologetic studies, and polemics. It may be noticed here that this tripartite typology is quite close to the one proposed in the second chapter of this dissertation.

Contextualizing the contemporary Arab Muslim writings on the religious others, Brodeur mentions that from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, the Muslim civilization came into contact with the modern Western civilization. Hitherto the Muslim civilization had confidently encountered different cultural or religious traditions. What had been changed now, however, was the balance of power. For the first time in their history, Muslims had been taken simultaneously on the socio-political and intellectual fronts. A vast majority of the Muslim populations got exposed to the Western colonialism and imperialism, which disrupted the traditional political and economic patterns of different Muslim societies. While at the epistemological level, Muslim self understanding was confronted by the spirit of scientism, which again had roots in the Western civilization. Eventually, the Muslim struggle for political freedom surfaced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century which was followed by their ideological resistance to capitalism and communism. Here a development of movement from political freedom to economic independence is not difficult to notice. The third phase of the Muslim self assertion emerges with their ambition for intellectual independence which culminated in a systematic attempt to Islamize the Western sciences.<sup>88</sup> The movement of Islamization of knowledge bears an ambivalent approach to the modern Western scientific knowledge. On the one hand it reinterprets the Islamic values for acculturation into the Western scientific discourse while on the other hand the movement critiques the foundations of the Western scientific knowledge from Islamic perspective.<sup>89</sup>

Now, Brodeur interprets the contemporary wave of studies on religions other than Islam in the wider context of Muslim struggle for epistemological independence. Apparently, he intends to show that the cotemporary Arab Muslim studies on religions may be understood in the light of the encounters of the Muslim self with the Other, which is not simply the religious other. On the varieties of the perceived Others, he writes:

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<sup>88</sup>Brodeur, "Arabic Muslim Writings on Contemporary Religions Other than Islam," 241. See also, Brodeur, "From an Islamic Heresiography to an Islamic History of Religions: Modern Arab Muslim Literature on 'Religious Others' with Special Reference to Three Egyptian Authors", 106.

<sup>89</sup> See, Brodeur, "Arabic Muslim Writings on Contemporary Religions Other than Islam," 243.



Other has taken many shapes, from the ambiguous concepts of “the West,” “the Christian West,” “the Jewish conspiracy,” “Israel,” “the United States,” and so on, to the varied reinterpretations of Qur’anic concepts such as “People of the Book” (*ahl al-kitab*), “Ignorant” (*jahil*), “Infidel” (*kafir*), and “Hypocrite” (*munafiq*).<sup>90</sup>

It is in the context of this complex relational dynamics with the so-called modern West that the classical ‘generic system of religious Others’ witnesses vigorous developments. He proposes an overarching interpretive schema about these developments and shows how the relationship with the perceived Other continued to change from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century.

1. The European encroachment and domination (1798-1920): confronting the ‘Other’ without, growing within
2. The European colonial occupation (1920- 1948): internalizing the ‘Other’ within
3. The political liberation (1948-1973): confronting the internalized ‘Other’
4. The religious liberation (1973-1993): confronting the ‘religious Others’ within
5. The globalization process (1991-1998) confronting the ‘religious Others’ without<sup>91</sup>

One can see how assiduous this systemization is. His scheme gives a fairly clear idea of how the confrontation with ‘Other’ developed into encounter with the ‘religious Others’ and thus resulted in emergence of what may be called the ‘Muslim Religious Studies’ or ‘Islamic History of Religions’. One may legitimately raise the question of possible rounding off with regard to historical data in proposing such grandiose theories. Be as it may, Brodeur should be given the benefit for pioneering a theoretical understanding of the study of religion in the Muslim context.

Perhaps the most interesting part of his study is its fifth chapter that is entitled as “From an Islamic Heresiography to an Islamic History of Religions”. After analyses of the work of three above mentioned Egyptian scholars, he proposes two hypotheses. First, the output of the relationship between the scientific study of religion and the Islamic study of religion is that three scholars in question remain subservient to their own worldview. That is because their Islamic tradition imparts the hermeneutical framework through which they can

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid., 240.

<sup>91</sup>Brodeur, "From an Islamic Heresiography to an Islamic History of Religions: Modern Arab Muslim Literature on 'Religious Others' with Special Reference to Three Egyptian Authors", 88-108.

make sense of non-Islamic religions. The other hypothesis is that the scope of their usage of the Western scientific tools for the study of religion is circumscribed by the limits imposed by their understanding of Islam.<sup>92</sup> There seems to be no reason to disagree with these conclusions.

At the end, it may be observed that the dynamic concept of ‘differential space’, historically oriented notion of ‘religious others’, and a cognizance of the fact that the identity of scholar plays an important role in any academic venture, all this makes Brodeur’s appraisal of the Muslim scholarship remarkably innovative, reflexive, self critical, and less reductionist. Instead of making false pretensions of absolute objectivity, Brodeur honestly admits that his own project should be appreciated keeping in mind the limitations afforded by his identity and cultural background. While evaluating the Muslim study of religions, he is alert to the fact that his own standpoint is contingent on a particular academic framework. By using the creatively developed conceptual alternatives like ‘literature on religious others’ and ‘generic system on religious others’ he avoids the pitfall of, though with partial success, simplistic application of the judgmental terms like *heresiography*, *apologetic*, and *scientific* on a body of scholarship to which these readily available concepts do not apply squarely. He acknowledges the plurality of identity-processes and on that premise envisions a pluralistic discipline of religious studies in which scholars from a broad variety of backgrounds may participate.<sup>93</sup> (We shall discuss this point again in the third part of the present study).

By way of conclusion, it can be said that the Western views of the Muslim study of other religions are diverse and changing with the passage of time. It is maintained here that the lack of agreement on the definition of religious studies or its essential traits leads to difference of approaches to the Muslim study of religions. As regards the disciplinary self-perception of religious studies, already two broader tendencies have been noted above in the second chapter. Allowing some generalization, the continental scholars are inclined to relatively more positivistic religious studies that is considered to be based on universally applicable scientific method. In this frame of mind it becomes difficult for non-European scholarly traditions to take part in the worldwide pursuit of religious studies. They are supposed to mimetically adopt the Western notions of science and scientific inquiry. On the

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<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 289.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 290.

other hand, Anglo-American scholars are generally inclined to a more pluralistic and “humanistic” – to use the expression of Kitagawa – concept of religious studies, which allows space for different cultural traditions to become part of the enterprise of religious studies. We have seen above that Anglo-American scholars namely Bruce Lawrence, Steven Wasserstrom, Patrice Brodeur, and David Thomas tend to accept that there can be a credible model of the study of religion, which is not identical to the one which has evolved in the West. On the other hand, the continental scholars like Jacques Waardenburg, Camilla Adang, and Wassilios Klein appear to be having a universalized understanding of the scientific inquiry and therefore their judgments about the Muslim study of religions diverges from the first group of scholars.

## Chapter 5:

### 5. Muslim Perceptions of Religious Studies

The approach adopted as a guiding principle for the study of different religious traditions in this book [*Dunya kay Barray Mazāhib* (Major Religions of the World)] is the one which we have referred to earlier as ‘neutral’, ‘sympathetic’, and ‘objective’. These features are part and parcel of the methodological paradigm in the study of religion - religion as such as well as different religious traditions - that emerged distinctly after the Second World War and has become known as phenomenological approach. (‘Imād al-Ḥasan Fārūqī, ND: 13)

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In its [phenomenological school’s] insistence upon the value and meaning of each religious phenomenon in itself, irrespective of whatever historical origin it may have had, some phenomenologists became more or less collectors of religious ideas and symbols, as if they were going to place them in a museum, rather than interpreters of these phenomena in the light of the living traditions to which these phenomena belong. (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 1999: 286)

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Is it admissible to be agnostic or atheistic merely for the sake of academic enquiry? (Suleman Dangor, 1993: 284)

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In order to understand Muslim perceptions and appropriations of religious studies, a look into the cultural conditions that have put both knowledge traditions face to face can be helpful. After coming into contact with the Western knowledge tradition in the modern period, an increased interest in studying other religions is noticeable in various Muslim societies. There is a mushroom growth of literature on different religions appearing in important languages of the Muslim world. One of the obvious features of this literature is that the classical genres have been replaced with another set of nomenclature namely *muqāranat al-adyān* (comparative religions), *tārikh al-adyān* (history of religions), and *dirāsāt al-adyān* (study of religions). The only exception seems to be *al-milal wa al-niḥal* which continues to exist to a certain degree.

<sup>1</sup> Out of these contemporary appellations *muqāranat al-adyān* is more likely to include the residuals of polemics since the genres like *al-munāẓarāt* and *al-ruddūd* have declined in general and have become virtually extinct, at least within the folds of modern university system. Needless to say, the development owes to the influence of modern academic culture and intellectual mindset.

A brief detour to historical background of this development stands in order. Before coming under the sway of colonization, or pressing Western influences otherwise,<sup>2</sup> the educational institutions in the Muslim world used to pursue an integrated knowledge tradition which had been rooted in a social system which knew no polarity of church and state. This system, however, fell apart as the modern states established educational system on the European pattern, which was grounded in particular notions of bifurcation of public and private spheres, and consequently that of state and religion. The Muslim religious leadership ('*Ulamā*') sought to continue their cherished knowledge traditions and founded independent institutions (*madrasah*, also called *dīnīmadrasah*) which were seldom patronized or

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Najāḥ Maḥmūd al-Ghunaymī, '*Ulamā' al-Milal wa-al-Niḥal* (*Scholars of al-Milal wa-al-Niḥal*), *Silsilat mawqif al-'aqaḍiyyīn al-Islāmīyīn min al-tayyārāt al-sūfiyah al-Islāmīyah*; al-juz' 1 (Cairo: Dār al-Manār 1987), Ja'far Subḥānī, *Abḥāthfī al-Milal wa-al-Niḥal* (*Studies in al-Milal wa-al-Niḥal*), 2 ed., 2 vols. (Qum: Markaz Mudīrīyāt-i-Ḥawzah-i- 'Ilmiyyah-i Qum, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Not all the regions with majority Muslim populations were colonized during the colonialization movement; obvious exceptions being Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan. However, the powerful modern notions of state, government, and the appearance of state patronized universities changed the institutional structure of received knowledge traditions across the Muslim lands.

recognized by state.<sup>3</sup> Since the ‘*Ulamā*’ were interested primarily in defending and preserving Islam in the face of perceived cultural invasion, they singled out only religious disciplines for inclusion in the curricula of *dīnīmadrasahs*. This is how their own strategy became instrumental – consciously or unconsciously – in strengthening the bifurcation of religious and secular sciences. The result of these developments was that two parallel educational systems emerged, one for the secular and modern disciplines and the other for religious or theological studies.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the indigenously developed traditions pertaining to non-religious know-how became alienated from both institutions, the modern university and *dīnī madrasah*. Lacking the institutional backup, several indigenous sciences quickly regressed and became extinct or ‘endangered species’.<sup>5</sup>

Such disciplinary reordering and reprioritizing left *al-milal wa al-niḥal*, already a marginal tradition, completely ignored along with several other indigenous sciences like medicine, philosophy, astronomy and so on. Therefore, it is not surprising that the contemporary wave of Muslim studies on religions is associated with the institution of modern university instead of the traditional *madrasah*. Practically, a sizeable number of universities in today’s Muslim world incorporate departments of *muqāranat al-adyān* (comparative religions), *tārikh al-adyān* (history of religions) or *dirāsāt al-adyān* (study of religions).<sup>6</sup> However, out of the university system, the term *muqāranat al-adyān* (or its equivalent in other languages) is also used in popular religious literature in various Muslim societies. It is especially in this latter case that *muqāranat al-adyān* quite often appears to be reminiscent of the *al-munāẓrāt* and *al-ruddūd* genres with obvious polemical overture. On the other hand, the nomenclatures *tārikh al-adyān* and *dirāsāt al-adyān* seldom occur out of the university context and render comparatively more objective description of religions.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband 1860-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> Jamal Malik, *Colonialization of Islam: Dissolution of Traditional Institutions in Pakistan* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> The metaphorical application of this phrase to the ignored branches of classical knowledge goes back to Ḥasan ‘Abd al-Latif al-Shafi‘ī, former president of the International Islamic University Islamabad.

<sup>6</sup> Al-Azhar University Cairo, International Islamic University Islamabad, and International Islamic University Malaysia are some cases in point.

The institution of university in the contemporary Muslim societies can be seen as having remarkable western influence where most of the scientific and social scientific disciplines are approached using contemporary academic methodologies. For that matter, one might surmise that the universities in Muslim countries would be pursuing religious studies in the modern Western sense. However, for a variety of reasons this is not the case in most of the instances. The foremost reason being that unlike other disciplines, religious studies is perceived not only as a modern Western discipline but also as an enterprise somehow related to the Christian religious background. Understandably, the scholars of this field, then, incline to take recourse to the Islamic cultural and religious heritage in their academic persuasions. Thus, a sort of mutuality has developed between the institutions of university and *madrasah* at least as regards the disciplines of Islamic and comparative religious studies. This situation makes the university departments named as departments of comparative religions, history of religions and so on, an arena of interaction between the modern (Western) and classical Islamic knowledge traditions.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, an interesting mechanism of adaptation as well as critical appropriation of both modern religious studies and *al-milal wa al-niḥal* comes into play. This phenomenon is leading to revival of the *al-milal wa al-niḥal* tradition – in its wider sense – on the one hand, and to adoption of selective elements of modern western approaches to the study of religion on the other. It is quite natural, then, that such self imposing ambivalence compels thinking minds to reflect on the study of religion at a meta-disciplinary level. The familiar questions of theory and method in the study of religion become pressing. However, because of the different historical experience of the Muslim societies these questions are not necessarily framed the same way as they are done in the European or North American cultural settings. Thus, the obtaining situation of creative tension has generated a budding

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<sup>7</sup> An example of such interaction, though in a different context, can be found in Austin, "Qiran al-Sa'âdain: The Dialogue between Eastern and Western Learning at the Delhi College."

tradition of reflection on the problems involved in the study of religions in their multiplicity.<sup>8</sup> That is to say, encounters of the two knowledge traditions in question extend from the first- to second-order level of mutual perceptions. In more clear terms, studying the Other is gradually entering into a phase in which it is also studied how is the Other studying 'us', or, in a very few cases, how can 'we' understand each other.

The ensuing output of such deliberations can be divided into three broader types. One approach is to mull over the legacy of classical *al-milal wa al-niḥal* tradition in a striving to explicate its methodological nuances and to figure out how the methodological innovations of classical Muslim scholars relate to the contemporary approaches in the study of religion. The second approach is to somehow get aligned with, and seek participation in the worldwide discipline of religious studies without significant recourse to *al-milal wa al-niḥal* tradition. Keeping in view this approach, some scholars have analyzed the patterns in the study of religion in different Muslim societies today, and the theoretical issues involved in this persuasion. Finally, a few Muslim intellectuals have critiqued religious studies on a variety of themes and issues. Such critiques are sometimes accompanied by suggested alternatives and sometimes not. What is common in these three types of discussions is that their main point of reference is contemporary Western religious studies, whether perceived profoundly or superficially.

Before moving ahead, two points may be clarified, however. One, the development of second-order reflections on the study of religions by Muslim scholars is only at embryonic stage; from the above categorization one may not get the impression of a large scale intellectual debate. Two, the above categorization may be understood simply as a tool for analysis of the available material; it does not signify clearly identifiable established schools. Having said this, what follows is an overview of these three strands of the intellectual debate and a modest attempt to unearth the perceptions that underlie them.

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<sup>8</sup> The examples of recent second-order studies on *al-Milal wa-al-Niḥal* legacy include Najāḥ Maḥmūd al-Ghunaymī, *'Ulamā' al-milal wa-al-niḥal (Scholars of al-milal wa-al-niḥal)* (Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1987). See also, Maytham Janābī, *'Ilm al-Milal wa-al-Niḥal: Taqālīd, al-Maqālāt wa-al-Aḥkam fī Thaqāfat al-Islām (The Science of al-Milal wa-al-Niḥal: Traditions, Discourses, and Observations on the Islamic Culture)* (Damascus: Dār Kan'ān lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr, 1994). The Muslim views of religious studies are discussed in the following chapters.



### 5.1 (Re)invention of a Tradition? From al-Milal wa al-Niḥal to Muqāranat al-Adyān

The contemporary appraisals of *al-milal wa al-niḥal* legacy in relation to religious studies occur usually with reference to some individual classical scholar such as al-Bīrūnī or al-Shahrastānī. However, a few articles have been published which seek to systematize the whole legacy and establish its relevance for today's world.<sup>9</sup> Let us discuss first some examples in which the work of classical Muslim scholars on religions is revisited in a new light.

A Malaysian scholar Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman<sup>10</sup> has published her doctoral thesis on al-Bīrūnī's methodology in the study of religion. As already mentioned in the third chapter, the book's title itself speaks a lot about author's perception of the contemporary discipline of religious studies. In fact, the title might appear for many as a contradiction in terms as it presumes existence of the "Muslim *Religionswissenschaft*" before it was "taken up" by the Western scholars when the Muslims showed unfortunate negligence towards it after initial achievements.<sup>11</sup> To say nothing of such banal apologetic claim, the important question that arises is this, how the study of religion can be "scientific" if it is overtly carried out from the stand point of a particular religion. Kamaruzaman's answer to this dilemma is that the discipline of study of religion – for which her preferred title is *Religionswissenschaft* – has two parts, subject matter and methodology. There can be no question of "Islamizing" the subject matter as it would simply mean giving false descriptions of other religions. Therefore, she concludes that what makes the Islamic *Religionswissenschaft* Islamic is its

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<sup>9</sup> The example of this type of works include: Ahmad F. Yousif, "Studying the "Other": Challenges and Prospects of Muslim Scholarship on World Religions," *Studies in Contemporary Islam* 2, no. 1 (2000). Dīn Muḥammad, "Min Manāhij 'Ulamā' al-Muṣimīn fī Dirāsāt al-Adyān (Some Methods of the Muslim Scholars in Study of Religions)," *Annual Journal of the International Islamic University/Hawliyyat al-Jāmi'ah al-'Islāmiyyah al-'Ālamiyyah* 3 (1995). Drāz, *Al-Dīn: Buhūth Mumhhidah li Dirāsāt Tārīkh al-Adyān (Religion: The Fundamental Questions in the Study of History of Religions)*.

<sup>10</sup> She is a faculty member at the department of comparative religions, International Islamic University Malaysia.

<sup>11</sup> Kamaruzaman, "Towards Forming an Islamic Methodology of Religionswissenschaft: The Case of al-Bīrūnī," 23-24.

unique methodology. She further argues that already al-Bīrūnī had laid bare the foundations of Islamic methodology for the study of religion which is still valid and universally applicable. To quote her:

It is obvious that, although al-Bīrūnī's methodology was formulated in the tenth-eleventh century, it is as relevant and as effective today. Also it is indisputable that his methods, except for his typology of religions, are universal in nature, and can be applied by any scholar of whatever religious, or non-religious, affiliation.<sup>12</sup>

As to what exactly is the methodology of al-Bīrūnī, and how is it distinct from the obtaining religious studies methodologies, Kamaruzaman goes a long way to glean the methodological principles of al-Bīrūnī. More central of these principles are that scholars' description of a religion must be acceptable for adherents of the religion in question, that is to say the believers should be allowed to speak for themselves. That instead of relying on hearsay, scholars should consult the scriptures and authentic texts of the tradition in question. Moreover, only those teachings ascribed to a religious community should be considered authentic and representative, which are articulated by their learned men and religious leaders instead of the ignorant people.<sup>13</sup>

According to Kamaruzaman the Islamic methodology is different from the contemporary Western methodologies in that:

- a) It does not explicitly or implicitly deny the aspect of sacredness in religions.
- b) One needs not conceal one's religious convictions in order to be objective and just in description of other religions. What is important, however, is that prejudices must not be allowed to sneak into one's assessments.

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.: 38-39.

<sup>13</sup> She has spared more than forty pages for this topic in her book. See, Kamaruzaman, *Early Muslim Scholarship in Religionswissenschaft*, 75-116. See also, Kamaruzaman, "Al-Bīrūnī: Father of Comparative Religion," 131-36.

- c) The Islamic methodology does not, as a rule, shun the possibility of value judgments that are fair and rationally plausible, provided that they are not accompanied by bigotry and disdain about other religions.<sup>14</sup>

One must say that in general her analysis is diligent and illuminating. However, unfortunately it is not free from apologetic tone and hasty generalizations here and there. The most important observation is that when she uses familiar terms like “scientific” and “objective”, she does not mean their commonly known connotation. This deviation from the generally known meaning of these terms is not unconscious. She writes: “Obviously, what al-Bīrūnī meant by “scientific and objective” is quite different from that as understood by the Enlightenment scholars.”<sup>15</sup> This is a significant statement which can be taken as underlying the philosophical position resembling the notions of ‘multiple modernities’ propounded by S. N. Eisenstadt<sup>16</sup> or the idea of culturally contingent plural rationalities.<sup>17</sup> Be as it may, the author does not substantiate this pivotal point and mentions it just in passing.

A more or less similar approach has been adopted by the Nigerian scholar Isa Muhammd Maishanu.<sup>18</sup> He has undertaken an interesting study on the comparative method in the Muslim and Western contexts. For this study he focused on the comparative method of al-Āmirī and al-Bīrūnī on the one hand, and that of Joachim Wach and Mircea Elieade on the other. He concludes that the comparative method employed by Muslim scholars such as al-Āmirī and al-Bīrūnī is different from the modern western comparativism. For Maishanu, the study of religion is different in the two knowledge traditions because: “The Muslims, in a clear point of difference from the Westerners, do not start their study of religion as agnostics

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<sup>14</sup> See Kamaruzaman, *Early Muslim Scholarship in Religionswissenschaft*, 116. See also, Kamaruzaman, "Towards Forming an Islamic Methodology of Religionswissenschaft: The Case of al-Bīrūnī," 34.

<sup>15</sup> Kamaruzaman, "Towards Forming an Islamic Methodology of Religionswissenschaft: The Case of al-Bīrūnī," 34.

<sup>16</sup> See, Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities."

<sup>17</sup> See, Rorty, "A Pragmatic View of Rationality and Cultural Difference."

<sup>18</sup> He did his PhD at the International Islamic University, Islamabad and is now based at the UsmanuDanfodiyoUniversity, Sokoto, Nigeria.

or atheists, even in terms of methodology only.”<sup>19</sup> It goes without saying that he does not stand with the “agnostic and atheistic” Western religious studies.

Maishanu makes contrasts and draws parallels between the two sides of the supposed divide using the following parameters: treatment of original sources, objectivity and room for value judgments, criteria of judgments, and the problem of truth. On a closer look, however, the discussion of these parameters boils down to two main questions, namely the problem of truth claims in the study of religion and the room for value judgments. Regarding truth claims, his standpoint is that for Muslims the issue of truth in religion is vital. Their interest in the study of religions is not just for the sake of knowledge, such that has no relevance for man’s ultimate concerns about life and his destiny.<sup>20</sup> To quote him: “Al-Āmirī had a clear concept of the ‘religion of truth’ which seems to have separate essence whose features are well-known and which serves as a criterion and a standard by which other religions are ‘gauged’.”<sup>21</sup>

He makes a claim to the similar effect about al-Bīrūnī as well, and supports his position by quoting the following statement of the latter: “If contents of these quotations happen to be utterly heathenish, and the followers of the truth, i.e. the Muslims find them objectionable, we can only say that such is the belief of the Hindus.”<sup>22</sup> Apparently, Maishanu’s interpretation of al-Bīrūnī on this point is far- fetched. Admittedly, the quotation proves that al-Bīrūnī used to believe in Islam as the true religion but it is not difficult to see that, contrary to what Maishanu wants to corroborate, al-Biruni’s statement implies that a scholar of religion should be able to differentiate between understanding and believing, and that it is not necessary to believe in a religion in order to write about it.

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<sup>19</sup>Maishanu, "The Comparative Method in the Study of Religion: A Case Study of Al-'Amiri and Al-Biruni and Some Selected Modern Western Approaches", 374-75.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 390.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 389.

<sup>22</sup>Abū Rayhān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī, *Albernuni's India*, trans. Edward C. Sachau, 2 vols., vol. 1 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1914), 7. Quoted in Maishanu, "The Comparative Method in the Study of Religion: A Case Study of Al-'Amiri and Al-Biruni and Some Selected Modern Western Approaches", 389.

Closely related to concern for truth is the issue of value judgments. On the authority of al-Āmirī, he maintains that value judgment is an essential part of the order of things in the world and also crucial for doing justice to the religion being studied. However, two principles should be kept in mind while passing a value judgment. One, judgment should be based on comparison of comparables, for instance doctrines should be compared with doctrines and practices with practices. The second principle is that only those views should be ascribed to religious communities, which are confessed by their mainstream tradition instead of the minority views.<sup>23</sup> It is, however, questionable if only these two principles can sufficiently safeguard against the overt and covert biases.

Strangely, in the face of such insistence on the validity of value judgments, Maishanu himself comes up with a typology of the classical Muslim writings on religions divided into apologetics, polemics and “objective-descriptive (scientific) works”. Then, with regard to the third type of works he remarks:

The third kind of Muslim writings on religion is what we call ‘objective-descriptive’ or scientific works. As said earlier it will be gross injustice to deny the fact that not all what the Muslims wrote in this field can safely be called theological, while other works by other writers not up to their standard of scholarship are viewed as ‘scientific’. In this group of works, we see Muslim scholars usually study the history of the religions of the world, describing their beliefs and rituals objectively, and not allowing their Islamic beliefs to interfere or affect their understanding of other traditions.<sup>24</sup>

One can notice that on the one hand he argues that the study of religion should be aimed at determining the relative value and truth of religions while on the other hand he seems to be appreciating the objective and descriptive works of the classical Muslim scholars instead of the apologetics and polemics. Against such state of affairs, it seems difficult to get a coherent picture of what exactly the author wants to establish.

An instance of thoughtful revisitation of *al-milal wa al-niḥal* legacy is found in the work of Gulam Haider Aasi. His main contribution is a meticulously carried out study on Ibn

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<sup>23</sup>Maishanu, "The Comparative Method in the Study of Religion: A Case Study of Al-'Amiri and Al-Biruni and Some Selected Modern Western Approaches", 385.

<sup>24</sup>Isa Muhammad Maishanu, "Muslim Study of Religion: A Critical Analysis of Its Basic Premises and Methods " *Hamdard Islamicus* 29, no. 1 (2006): 73.

Ḥazm's famous work on religions namely *Kitāb al-Faṣl fī al-Milal wa al-Ahwā' wa al-Niḥal* (The Conclusive Book on Religious Communities, Sects, and Denominations). The study and analysis of the book is preceded by a chapter on the Qur'ānic view of the unity of religions and diversity of religious traditions and another one on the Muslim encounters with other religions in history. Thus, the author combines thematic and historical dimensions in his analyses of the foundations and context of the Muslim legacy of the study of religions.

Aasi maintains that Qur'an proclaims the unity of religion and declares that the true religion has always been one and the same. On the other hand, Qur'an not only acknowledges the fact of diversity of religious communities but also presents it as something of positive value. This twofold concept of religion is evident from the fact that out of the three closely related terms namely *dīn* (religion), *milla* (religious tradition) and *umma* (religious community), the Qur'an never uses *dīn* and *milla* in their plural forms, while the plural of the third term *umma* occurs as *umum*. In fact, one can see that according to the Qur'an religion is combination of two elements: a) doctrines and beliefs and, b) rituals and rites. Now, the basic doctrines pertaining to the essence of religion remain unchanged. However, rites and rituals change with regard to different times, places, and people. Another reason behind the fact of diversity is that due to sectarian tendencies and moral deterioration over the ages, people lost the sight of the essence of religion. Thus, the obtaining religions represent a mixture of truth and error.<sup>25</sup> This is how

the Qur'an does not countenance indifference or relativism to the truth nor isolation and exclusivism. Instead it enjoins continuous exchange of views, and meaningful and healthy dialogue among different religious communities. This command makes the learning of the history of religions imperative for its followers."<sup>26</sup>

With regard to the historical context of the Muslim study of religions, Aasi distinguishes between the internal and external factors which generated two different branches of knowledge respectively. The doctrinal disputes between different Islamic sects and schools generated *al-kalām* and the tension with other religious traditions impelled the

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<sup>25</sup>Aasi, *Muslim Understanding of Other Religions: A Study of Ibn Ḥazm's Kitāb al-Faṣl fī al-Milal wa al-Ahwā' wa al-Niḥal*, 15-16. See also, Aasi, "The Qur'ān and Other Religious Traditions ": 80-81.

<sup>26</sup>Aasi, *Muslim Understanding of Other Religions: A Study of Ibn Ḥazm's Kitāb al-Faṣl fī al-Milal wa al-Ahwā' wa al-Niḥal*, 17-18.

emergence of *al-milal wa al-niḥal*. Unlike some other contemporary Muslim scholars, he clearly distinguishes between different kinds of works that were produced by the Muslims before the modern times. In his view, these types are a) accounts of personal dialogues between people of different faiths, b) apologetics, c) polemics, and d) works that pertain to “a systematic study of the nature and function of religious phenomena, the nature of truth-claims of diverse religious traditions, the division of religions into various sects, and the process of religious development and change.”<sup>27</sup> It is the fourth types of works that are generally denoted as *al-milal wa al-niḥal* and which he refers to approvingly.

About the contemporary discipline of religious studies he maintains that it emerged against the backdrop of division of knowledge into humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. This Western division is based upon postulates of anthropocentrism, evolutionism, and materialism. That is why the early *Religionswissenschaft* from second half of the nineteenth century onwards was obsessed with the question of origin of religion. He describes the difference between the Western and the Muslim traditions in the study of religion in the following words:

[T]hey reduced religion to an element of culture, rather than looking at man as *homo religiosus* and treating the religious phenomenon as the very core of human culture and civilization. In contrast, Muslim scholars conceived religion as the core and basis of all human culture and civilization, and saw all other branches of knowledge as directly related to, and dependent upon, the science of religion.<sup>28</sup>

In the final analysis it may be viewed that the approach discussed above with reference to three contemporary Muslim scholars is posed with two fundamental theoretical questions. First, how to revive the *al-milal wa al-niḥal* legacy in the light of contemporary academic culture without depriving the former of its Muslim identity. Second, and in fact a corollary of the first question, what is or should be the relationship between theological studies of religion by the followers of different religions and the supposedly neutral academic study of religion. These are the pressing questions which cannot be easily bypassed when one is speaking about the study of religion in the context of, and from the perspective of a particular religious tradition. The authors whose views have been discussed above apparently

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

show awareness of the development through which the discipline of religious studies has been going, however, they either did not address these pivotal questions at all or fall short of giving a convincing answer to them. Similarly, it becomes clear from the above discussion that when these scholars use the terms like ‘academic’, ‘scientific’ and ‘objective’ they most likely have different sense of these terms in their minds. This seems particularly true in the case of Kamaruzaman and to a lesser degree Maishanu as well. If this inference is correct, then the scholar concerned would also be required to elaborate his or her concept of rationality, objectivity, or whatever is peculiar of him or her.

Theoretically, it appears that the perceived other – that is religious studies – is seen as manifesting the tenets of the *al-milal wa al-niḥal* scholarship.<sup>29</sup> This assumption justifies glorification of the latter for preceding the former in achieving the scholarly standards. Paradoxically, however, distinct identity of the autochthonic knowledge tradition is also asserted at the same time. The drawback of this approach is that it standardizes religious studies and forestalls the prospects of a creative symbiosis between the two knowledge traditions.

This ambivalence can be interpreted with reference to the notion of ‘invention of tradition’. For, without any questions contemporary university departments for the study of religions do not represent continuation of *al-milal wa al-niḥal* tradition. One may argue thus, what is happening here is that certain elements are selected from the past and grafted over the modern religious studies tenets to invent the ‘Muslim religious studies’. To a certain level it seems true. This strategy serves two purposes. For the “domestic consumption”, the claims of autochthonicity legitimize the study of other religions in front of the conservative religious elements of the society. That is to say, if al-Bīrūnī, Ibn Ḥazm, and al-Shahrastānī are glorified by all for their work on other religions, why should be those condemned who are trying to do the same today?

At a deeper level, however, this dual appropriation renders acceptance of the scientific ethos of religious studies on the one hand and rejection of its cultural contingencies afforded by the European cultural and religious background on the other. In other words, the Muslim

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<sup>29</sup> Such a theoretical position is quite evident in Basit Bilal Koshul, "Studying the Western Other, Understanding the Islamic Self: A Qur'anically Reasoned Perspective," *Iqbal Review: Journal of the Iqbal Academy Pakistan* 46, no. 2&4 (2005).



intelligentsia feels that if cultural contingencies are inescapable for a discipline like religious studies then why not to return to their own cultural heritage. However turning over the tables, one can also argue that the institution of modern university artificially imposed itself over the existing indigenous structures. In this context, the university departments like comparative religions and history of religions become the ‘invented tradition’ instead of the *al-milal wa al-niḥal*.

## 5.2 Critique of Religious Studies

From the above discussion it becomes clear that one outcome of the Muslim scholars’ encounter with religious studies is an inward gaze, which culminates in the retrospective view of legacy of *al-milal wa al-niḥal*. In other words, the solution of the intellectual challenge is sought by looking back towards the past. Another Muslim response pertains to critique of religious studies on a variety of theoretical and methodological levels. This response can be considered as repulsive instead of being regressive.

In the writings of Muslim scholars on the themes related to religion and the study of religion, one can find, here and there, moderate to severe criticisms of religious studies, its assumptions, methodologies and cultural biases. However, it would be safe to say that the Muslim criticism of religious studies is not a momentous development yet. Mainly, we have got some scattered opinions appearing in the form of articles or books sections, perhaps with the only exception of the works of well-known anthropologist Talal Asad, who has addressed the theme of study of religion in West at length.<sup>30</sup> Keeping in view the scarcity of material on this particular aspect of the discussion, it seems more appropriate to arrange this section of the chapter with reference to critical approaches instead of discussing individual scholars. Within the framework of the Muslim culture, observations about religious studies have been enlisted by Kamaruzaman in one place. The gist of these observations is given below in paraphrase:

- a) Religious studies is essentially agnostic or anti-religious.
- b) Its emergence owes to the evolutionary paradigm according to which religion is seen as merely an output of the historical progression.

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<sup>30</sup> See for instance, Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*.

- c) Religious studies' ideal of objectivity and neutrality is problematic and unachievable.
- d) In religious studies different forms, aspects, and functions of religion are studied in isolation from each other and thus one does not get a complete picture of what religion actually is.
- e) Religion is studied as a psychological or cultural phenomenon, and the reality of sacredness is rejected a priori, implicitly if not explicitly.
- f) Western scholars rely exclusively on rational inquiry, which cannot penetrate into the heart of man's spiritual life.
- g) Scholars' critical methods and explanatory theories hurt the sensitivities of the adherents of different religions. In other words, Believers are not allowed to speak for themselves.<sup>31</sup>

It may be observed that several of these criticisms are not specific with Muslims. Already scholars belonging to different persuasions are engaged in discussion of such critical issues.

Another scholar Suleman Dangor, who is based at the University of Durban-Westville, in South Africa, has written an article in which he thrashes out three main problematic aspects of the contemporary academic study of religion from the Islamic perspective:

- a) *Objectives*: contrary to the Western approaches to the study of religion, Muslim scholars believe that acquisition of knowledge should be purposeful and meaningful activity. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge does not fit into the Islamic frame of mind.
- b) *Historical background*: Approaches to Islam in religious studies cannot be disconnected from the background of orientalist scholarship which is often considered by Muslims as hostile towards Islam and Muslim societies
- c) *Approaches*: Muslim scholars have serious reservations about the naturalistic paradigm of the study of religion, which underlie the whole enterprise. The

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<sup>31</sup>Kamaruzaman, "Towards Forming an Islamic Methodology of Religionswissenschaft: The Case of al-Bīrūnī,"

naturalistic assumptions are evident from the focus on empirical and external aspects of religion without any reference to its transcendental reality in such studies.<sup>32</sup>

He concludes his article with these sharp remarks:

[I]t should be clear that most Muslim scholars are unlikely to adopt a non-normative approach to the study of Islam and Muslim societies. The adoption of a “non-ideological” approach poses serious theological problems for Muslim scholars. Is it admissible to be agnostic or atheistic merely for the sake of academic enquiry?<sup>33</sup>

Both of the above mentioned authors tend to substantiate these points. The present study, however, is not a critique of religious studies as such. It simply aims at stocktaking of the views that have been expressed by different Muslim scholars and their interpretation in the context of the main theme of the dissertation. Having said this and taking lead from the two listings given above, the Muslim criticism of religious studies is discussed below under three broad headings. It may be cautioned, nonetheless, that the themes discussed under these headings are interconnected somehow.

### **5.2.1 Criticism of the Basic Assumptions**

Majority of the Muslim authors who have written about religious studies share one common concern: religious studies is grounded in overt or covert naturalistic worldview. One of the important voices in this context is that of the US based Iranian philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr<sup>34</sup> who critiques the discipline of religious studies from the traditionalist standpoint.<sup>35</sup> He was invited to deliver the prestigious Gifford lectures in 1981 at the University of Edinburgh. In the course of these lectures he criticises the early *Religionswissenschaft* on the ground that it began against the background of a “scientism”, in which the reality of sacred was denied *a priori*. He maintains that without reference to the

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<sup>32</sup>Dangor, "The Attitude of Muslim Scholars to New Approaches in Religious Studies."

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.: 284.

<sup>34</sup> He is the only Muslim thinker included in the Library of Living Philosophers. See Lewis Edwin Hahn Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Randall E. Auxier, Lucian W. Stone, ed., *The philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, The Library of Living Philosophers (Chicago: Open Court, 2001).

<sup>35</sup>Nasr, "The *Philosophia Perennis* and the Study of Religion," 54-57.

sacred one cannot apprehend religion. However, the early *Religionswissenschaft* persistently eschewed any reference to it. To quote him, “the secularised mind has adopted every possible path and method to study the phenomenon and reality of religion and religions, provided the nature of the sacred as sacred is not considered seriously.”<sup>36</sup> In this context, myths, rites, and symbols were more attractive since such aspects of religion could be made subjects for scientific study more readily than the question of faith. According to him, such approach to religions implied as if music were to be studied in its purely mathematical and physical aspects and then the results were to be presented as scientific, and thereby the only correct and legitimate study of music.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the Western academic study of religion in the nineteenth century began as a highly unreligious, if not anti-religious enterprise.<sup>38</sup>

René Guénon (Abd al-Wāhid Yahyā), one of the pioneers of the traditionalist school made this critical point as early as 1921. In his book *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, he wrote: “The whole of this pretended “science of religions” rests on a few postulates which are nothing but sheer preconceptions; thus its exponents lay it down that every doctrine must have taken its start in “naturalism”.”<sup>39</sup>

Ismā‘īl Rājī al-Fārūqī (1340/1921-1407/1986) is another figure whose intellectual contributions cannot be disregarded by any student of the contemporary Muslim thought.<sup>40</sup> He has not only expressed his views about religious studies but has also come with creative alternatives from the Islamic perspective. Discussing the history of the study of religion in Europe after Romanticism, he points to an embedded scepticism behind the developments to

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<sup>36</sup>Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1999), 281.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>38</sup>Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2004), 10. See also Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (Albany: SUNY, 1973), 127.

<sup>39</sup>René Guénon, *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, trans. Marco Pallis (London: Luzac, 1945), 303. This was his first book, published in French as *Introduction générale à l’Étude des doctrines hindoues*. Paris: Éditions Trédaniel, 1921.

<sup>40</sup>The late Ismā‘īl Rājī al-Fārūqī was founder of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and the first president of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists. He has been Professor of Islamic Studies at the Temple University, Philadelphia.

which he calls epistemological individualism. According to him, it implied “denial of the religious knowledge, denial of transcendent reality, denial of the Absolute, in short, denial of God as traditional Christianity and Judaism have known him.”<sup>41</sup>

Another rising though not as well known scholar, Dheen Muhammad has contributed a number of articles on the theoretical issues in the field. He acknowledges the practical utility of some of the methods used in the Western religious studies but in his final analysis finds its scope limited in terms of genuine understanding of religion because of the underlying materialistic worldview and reliance on the evolutionary framework which implies denial of revelation and the transcendental reality of religions.<sup>42</sup>

Mention has already been made above of the views of Dangor. He forcefully asserts that Muslim scholars have serious reservations about the naturalistic approaches in the study of religion which have emerged since the nineteenth century. In the Muslim perspective, the positivist and reductionist theories of religion which explain religion “as an outcome of human desires, needs, and wants such as class interests, social solidarity, wish fulfilment, and the drive towards individuation and the maximation of well-being” are problematic.<sup>43</sup>

All in all, there seem to be a virtually unanimous concern among Muslim intellectuals that religious studies is agnostic or even hostile towards religion and that it does not take into account the issue of faith in transcendent reality of religion seriously. The above depiction of the views of Muslim scholars vindicates Armin W. Geertz’s contention that it is not only the issue of cultural hegemony or the faulty representations, but it is the secular, agnostic process that is perceived to be the greatest threat to indigenous cultures.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, "Meta Religion: Towards a Critical World Theology," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 3, no. 1 (1986): 18.

<sup>42</sup>Muhammad, "Mushkilat al-Manhaj fī 'Ilm al-Dīn al-Muqārīn fī al-Gharb (The Problem of Method in the Science of Comparative Religion in the West)," 205-06.

<sup>43</sup>Dangor, "The Attitude of Muslim Scholars to New Approaches in Religious Studies," 281-82.

<sup>44</sup>Geertz, "Global perspectives on methodology in the study of religion," 55.

### 5.2.2 Critique of the Methodologies

Another dimension of the Muslim critique of religious studies relates to its methodologies. To begin with, Ismā'īl Rājī al-Fārūqī has written a thought provoking article,<sup>45</sup> in which he delineates five stages of the study of religion with special reference to the Western world. In this scheme, he considers the anthropological sociological, psychological and historical methods as the contemporary approaches to the study of religion and puts them in stage four. While the phenomenological study of religion is singled out from rest of the methods as stage five. This order of the methods shows that al-Fārūqī conceives phenomenological approach as culmination of the religious studies approaches which makes some sense considering the fact that he wrote this article in mid 1980s when phenomenology of religion was still the dominant paradigm.

In his view, anthropological approach to religion is dependent on evolutionary thought while epistemologically it recognizes only behavioural data as valid input for a study. Besides, its emphasis on the ethnicity is exaggerated. Similarly, sociological method recognizes only behavioural and empirical data. The psychological method assumes religion to be a state of human consciousness as such. The historical method, in turn, depends upon all types of data – ethnographic, sociological, and psychological – to discover patterns of change which can be applied to other similar situations. Again, the axiom is evolutionist and history is construed as a self-determining process. To avoid the pitfalls of provincialism and reductionism implied in these approaches, a number of scholars of comparative religion have sought to devise a distinct method which could lead to understanding of the essence of religion. For this they borrowed the basic concepts such as *epoche* – suspension of judgement – and *eidetic* vision – uncovering the essence – from Edmund Husserl's phenomenology. Thus, the phenomenological approach in the study of religion takes the phenomenon of religion as they are and allows the believers to speak for themselves.<sup>46</sup> Al-Fārūqī does not hesitate to express his preference for the phenomenology of religions over other approaches.

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<sup>45</sup>al-Faruqi, "Meta Religion: Towards a Critical World Theology."

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.: 13-20.

In his words: “Without doubt, the phenomenology of religion is the highest point in the academic study of religion has reached in the West.”<sup>47</sup>

However, according to him the phenomenological study of religion, too, is not without shortcomings. It comprises two branches or processes, namely collection of data, and construction of meaning or systemization of data. These two processes can justify the specialized disciplines of, say, Islamic, Hindu and Christian studies, but not the comparative study of religion as an autonomous discipline. For this a third process is needed, namely judgment or evaluation. To quote him:

Out of the meaning-wholes constructed by the first two branches, one meaning-whole should be arrived at, which would belong to man as such. Like the second, this third operation is also a systematization, not so much of particular data of meaning-wholes, its task is that of relating the given meaning-wholes to the universal, the human, and the divine as such.<sup>48</sup>

Already in a lengthy essay al-Fārūqī has conceived the study of religion along these lines. His vision was that beyond collection of data and getting at the meaning-wholes, phenomenology of religion needed a third process that is judgment and evaluation. In lieu of this process he propounded the notion of Meta religion, which draws heavily on the Qur’anic view of universality of religious phenomenon.<sup>49</sup> His concept of Meta religion, however, did not find significant acceptance as a methodological principle among the scholars of religion.

Another instance of the critique of phenomenology of religion by Muslim scholars is found in an insightful essay entitled “Phenomenological Approach in the Study of Religion in the West: A Critical View” which is published by Dheen Muhammad. The essay takes stock of the background against which the phenomenological method in the study of religions emerged, how it is related to the philosophical phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, its prominent proponents, its main characteristics, and its relationship with other methods in the study of religion. Needless to say, the essay pertains to a critique of the phenomenology of religion from a Muslim’s viewpoint.

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid.: 20.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.: 26.

<sup>49</sup> See, Ibid.: 40-57. See also, Isma'il Ragi A. al-Faruqi, "History of Religions: Its Nature and Significance for Christian Education and the Muslim-Christian Dialogue," *Numen* 12, no. Fasc. 1, (1965): 47-59.

First of all, Dheen Muhammad makes an interesting distinction between two closely interconnected terms ‘approach’ and ‘method’. He views that “approach” has a more general import than that of the “method”. A method is a set of techniques which a researcher utilizes and an ordering of the steps which s/he takes in order to achieve reliable results of the research activity. A method, therefore, is subservient to the goal which the researcher has before her or him. On the other hand, an approach is particular point of view about the subject matter at hand which might include a set of assumptions, some philosophy and even methods. Any number of methods can be employed within the framework of a single approach. Therefore, method is subservient to approach but not the vice-versa. He makes an important point on the basis of this distinction. A researcher can utilize a method without necessarily accepting its associated approach. For instance, one can utilize the sociological method without endorsing the sociological approach to religion. This is how he comes up with an understanding through which one can keep distance from the baggage of assumptions that most of the Western approaches to religion underlie, without necessarily rejecting all the methods that have been developed for the study of various aspects of religious phenomenon.<sup>50</sup>

Having established this distinction, Dheen Muhammad maintains that phenomenology of religion is simultaneously a method and an approach, as is the case with sociology of religion, psychology of religion, and history of religion. Therefore, it is possible that one utilizes the phenomenological method without becoming a phenomenologist. For, it cannot be warranted that all those who utilize the phenomenological method are followers of Edmund Husserl or Gerardus van der Leeuw. Given this distinction a criticism of the phenomenological approach to religion does not necessarily apply to the study of religion that uses phenomenological method.<sup>51</sup>

Dheen Muhammad, then maintains that in so far as the phenomenological study of religion is concerned with data collection and classification, it is credible, however, when it comes down to assigning the meaning to that data, it is in deep trouble. A phenomenologist can either himself/herself try to find out the real significance of the religious phenomena or s/he can listen to the believers. Neither option is free of pitfalls. If s/he herself/himself tries to

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<sup>50</sup>Muhammad, "Al-Itijāh al-Zāhiratī fī Dirāsāt al-'Adyān: Ru'yah Naqdiyyah (The Phenomenological Approach in the Study of Religion in the West: A Critical View)," 128.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.: 128-30.



discover the meaning, he can miss the point completely as there will be no standard to check against. On the other hand, if s/he relies on believers, they can be mutually differing, or ignorant about subtleties of their own tradition, or simply deviating from the tenets of the original tradition. If one were to go through the books appearing as outcome of the phenomenological approach, one will find that most of them simply put together what they see the belief or practice of the adherents of a religion is, without making any differentiation between what the followers of a religious tradition are practicing and what the original sources of the tradition or their classical interpretations are.<sup>52</sup>

### 5.2.3 Criticism of the Cultural Baggage

Yet another important aspect of the Muslim intellectuals' critique of religious studies relates to its cultural baggage. In this category the most important voice is that of well-known theorist and anthropologist Talal Asad.<sup>53</sup> His critique of religious studies is a part of his widely influential theoretical contributions to the post-colonial discourse. Criticism in his view is more helpful when it aims at reformulating the questions that underlie a work instead of demolishing it.<sup>54</sup> This is how his critique of religious studies takes shape and develops along. He puts into question, before anything else, the category of religion itself arguing that far from being a universal concept it is a construction which cannot be understood in isolation from the historical experience of the Western civilization and the history of Christian church. More importantly, in his view the notion of religion is an outcome of the emergence of modern state which rests on the separation of public and private spheres of human activity. Moreover, the idea of universal and essentialist definition of religion, such as proposed by Clifford Geertz, can be seen as an extension of the West's expansionist moves and colonialism.<sup>55</sup> "My argument is", Asad writes, "that there cannot be a universal definition of

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid.: 31-32.

<sup>53</sup> It may be noted that he is the son of Muhammad Asad who was a Jew by birth but converted to Islam and then wrote prolifically about Islam and his spiritual journey. It would be safe to say that in the Muslim countries Muhammad Asad is known better than Talal Asad.

<sup>54</sup> Talal Asad, "Reading a Modern Classic: W.C.Smith's 'The Meaning and End of Religion'," *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (2001): 206.

<sup>55</sup> See, Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, 27-54, especially 40-43. See also,

religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive process.”<sup>56</sup>

Regarding methodology of religious studies, he maintains that it remains predicated on medieval Christian theological methods that treat religion as a text to be interpreted. However, these methods might not be appropriate for understanding of non-Christian traditions. Thus, the discipline of religious studies is questionable because it is theological while pretending that it is not.<sup>57</sup> According to him, the division of public and private spheres of human activities appeared as an outcome of the tug of war for power between church and state in the history of Western civilization. Keeping this in view, any study of “religion” will remain incredible if it does not take into account two important points into the picture. He elaborates these points in the following words:

First, I emphasize that in order to pay serious attention to religious experience in a comparative context, we must examine carefully the part played by religious practices in the formations of such experiences. And second, I plead for the integration of “secularism” into the analysis of religion – that is, for examining secularism not merely as a political ideology that structures the modern liberal state but as an untidy historical complex that includes behavior, knowledge, and sensibility in the flow of everyday life. Both of my points share this assumption: that in identifying what we call “religion”-whether musical, pictorial, or textual – the materialities of religion are integral to its constitution.<sup>58</sup>

It may be observed here that in emphasizing the importance of embodiment of religion and focus on practices, Asad is only in line with the classical Muslim theological position that views “faith”(imān) as utterance of the belief by tongue, to certify its truth in heart, and to practice its accompanied injunctions by limbs.

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>57</sup>Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Theology and the Turn to Cultural Analysis," in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, ed. Sheila Greeve Davaney Delwin Brown, Kathryn Tanner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 11-12.

<sup>58</sup>Asad, "Reading a Modern Classic: W.C.Smith's "The Meaning and End of Religion", " 206.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, too, points to the problematic cultural baggage of the discipline of religious studies. He contends that the history of this discipline carries with it the limitations of its cultural background and prejudices thereof. As the age of Enlightenment perceived itself as the last stage of perfection in the linear history of human civilization, religious studies - which is said to be the brain child of Enlightenment – tended to perceive other religions as a prelude to Christianity. These assumptions had been a double edged sword. The religions which preceded Christianity were treated as childish imitation of the reality that had not reached its perfection while Islam was seen as fundamentally an unnecessary development after achievement of the perfection in religious history.<sup>59</sup>

At the end of the present section (5.2: Critique of Religious Studies), the following general observations stand in order:

- a) Almost all of the scholars discussed above share one fundamental concern that religious studies is embedded in secular worldview, and that it approaches religion with naturalistic assumptions. For most of them the supposed negligence or denial of the truth in religion leads to reduction of the phenomenon of religion to different social and psychological factors. Thus, religious studies is seen as getting at fragmentary understanding of religion, which is understanding of a few observable elements and functions of religion. For these scholars the reality of religion as such cannot be grasped with social scientific approaches to religion alone.
- b) Muslim critique of religious studies is internally diverse. For instance, Kamaruzaman maintains that because of the social scientific theories imposed from above, adherents of the religion in question are deprived of the right to speak for them.<sup>60</sup> In other words, in her view the assumptions, theories, and explanatory frameworks of scholars overshadow the religious phenomena. On the other hand, Dheen Muhammad has rightly pointed out that if a scholar confines herself or himself to mere collection of the statements of believers, s/he is at risk of arriving at distorted understanding of the religion in question.

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<sup>59</sup>Nasr, *Sufi Essays* 127-28.

<sup>60</sup>Kamaruzaman, "Towards Forming an Islamic Methodology of Religionswissenschaft: The Case of al-Bīrūnī," 31.

- c) It may also be remarked that the important Muslim thinkers who critique religious studies write from quite diverse theoretical perspectives. For instance, Seyyed Hossein Nasr speaks from the traditionalist standpoint, Ismā‘īl Rāḥī al-Fīrūqī has the idea of Islamization of knowledge as the main frame of reference, while Talal Asad can be considered as the post-colonial theorist. Apparently, it is difficult to discover the central thread in these theoretical stances.
- d) Another important observation is that most of the critical concerns expressed by the above authors do not seem to be peculiarly Muslim concerns. Most of these issues are already under discussion within the Western academy. This fact indicates towards the prospects of a constructive theoretical engagement between the two knowledge traditions.
- e) Majority of the scholars whose view have been discussed above appear to be critical not in order to demolish religious studies but to meaningfully participate in this discursive field.

### 5.3 Receptive Approaches to Religious Studies

A third strand of the Muslim response to religious studies is mainly receptive and adoptive. A fundamental feature of this response is that most of the times the scholars concerned do not explicitly express this standpoint. Reason being that receptive response often indicates that religious studies has not been consciously objectified. Needless to say that the moment religious studies will get objectified, chances of uncritical adoption will become rare because of the perceived or real differences of historical experience and worldview between the two cultural traditions in question. Thus, it is noticed that the receptive response appears mostly as a surveys of the study of religion in the context of Muslim societies. However, not all the scholars who undertake such surveys are uncritically receptive to religious studies. One obvious case in point is that of Dheen Muhammad who has written an article entitled “Comparative Religion in Contemporary Muslim World”<sup>61</sup> and it is clear from the discussion of his view in the foregoing pages that his standpoint cannot be considered as uncritical adoption.

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<sup>61</sup>Dr. M.M.Dheen Mohamad, "Comparative Religion in Contemporary Muslim World," *Hawliat Al-Jam'ah Al-Islamiyyah Al-'Almiyyah* 4 (1996).

Let us begin with a set of studies that discuss the state of religious studies in Turkish history. First of all, we have a brief book-section on religious studies which discusses Islamic studies and study of other religions in Turkish history relating the developments to the changing ideology of the state. The authors note that the History of Religions that came into existence in the nineteenth century in Europe had already reached to Turkey during the Ottoman age. As early as 1874, the curriculum of Istanbul University included a course called *General History and Science of the Religions of Ancient People, or Mythology*.<sup>62</sup> Thereafter, in 1911 a course on History of Islam and History of Religions was introduced at the University. While in the Republic era the study of religions took momentum and three such courses became available. These courses were Philosophy of Religion, History of Turkish Religion, and History of Religions. In the present day Turkish Education system, the History of Religions course is offered at college and University level.<sup>63</sup>

Regarding the study of religion in Turkey, another article appeared soon after the above mentioned book chapter. It is "The Application of Western Comparative Religions and Linguistic Approaches to the Qur'ān in Turkey" by Bilal Gökkir. Gökkir declares that his article is about the Western influence on the developments in the study of religion in Turkey. Right at the beginning, he makes a significant statement with regard to the encounter of Muslim and Western scholarly traditions in Turkish academic circles:

Studies in comparative religion in Turkish academic circles, as we shall explain, have come under the theological influence of Islamic studies, particularly when Islam and the Qur'ān are involved in the comparison. On the other hand, scholars in Islamic studies have tried to implement some Western methodologies in their approach to Islamic issues.<sup>64</sup>

One of the most important points brought into light by the author is that since 1990s the question whether the Western approaches of linguistic analysis and historical textual

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<sup>62</sup>Ömer Faruk Harman and Ali Murat Yel, "The Science of Religions in Turkish History," in *Modern Societies & the Science of Religions*, ed. Gerrard Wieggers (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 247. One may ask, if such an early development can be safely considered as a result of the European influence.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 248-49.

<sup>64</sup>Gökkir, "The Application of Western Comparative Religious and Linguistic Approaches to the Qur'ān in Turkey," 249.

criticism are applicable to the Qur'ān or not is being discussed.<sup>65</sup> A number of symposiums have taken place around this theme. However, the author concludes that unlike the earlier decades, in the late twentieth century Turkish scholars started adopting more critical and analytical approach to the Western theories.<sup>66</sup> A similar conclusion has been drawn by Bülent Şenay more recently.<sup>67</sup>

After Turkey, Indonesia is another important Muslim country in the context of encounters of the modern Western and the traditional Islamic approaches to the Islamic and comparative religious studies. One of the reasons for such a development is the fact that Indonesian society is religiously pluralistic. At the time of independence in 1945, a heated debate took place whether the country should be declared as an Islamic or a secular state. Finally, a compromise was arrived at in the form of ideology of *Pancasila* (lit. five pillars) which meant that it was neither a straightforwardly Islamic nor a secular state. According to the *Pancasila* doctrine, five religions are officially recognized in Indonesia namely, Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.<sup>68</sup> Against this background an Indonesian academician cum politician Mukti Ali played the pioneering role in establishing the discipline of comparative study of religions in the country. Interestingly Ali was a student of Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Thus, partly because of the peculiar Indonesian practical concern for social harmony and partly because of the influence of Smith, Ali's approach to the religious studies is pragmatic one, that is, to utilize this discipline as a tool for social harmony. Herman L. Beck goes to the extent to state:

By way of conclusion it can be stated that the study of comparative religion in Indonesia cannot be detached from the figure of Mukti Ali....He based his approach to the study of

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid.: 257.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.: 259. See also,

<sup>67</sup>Şenay, "The Study of Religion, the History of Religions and Islamic Studies in Turkey: Approaches from "Phenomenological Theology" to Contextualism," 93-96.

<sup>68</sup>Herman L. Beck, "A Pillar of Social Harmony: The Study of Comparative Religion in Contemporary Indonesia," in *Modern Societies & the Science of Religions: Studies in Honour of Lammert Leetouwer*, ed. Gerard A. Wiegers & Jan Platvoet, *Numen Book Series: Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 331.

comparative religion on the way of scholars like Joachim Wach, Friedrich Heiler and Wilfred Cantwell Smith studied this discipline.<sup>69</sup>

The case of Mukti Ali is certainly a glaring example of the constructive encounter between the two knowledge traditions.

This brief overview of the receptive Muslim responses to religious studies will remain incomplete without discussion of the Adbdulkader Tayob's contribution in this regard. His discussion of the study of religion and the nature of Arab Islamic discourse in the late twentieth century should be considered as a supplement to the work of Brodeur which has been discussed above in the fourth chapter. Whereas Brodeur takes up the "orthodox" or confirmative Arab Muslim scholars for discussion of their approach in the study of other religions, Tayob's selection includes the "freethinkers" of the Arab world, too. After giving the general socio-political background and discussing how the defeats in Wars with Israel proved conducive to new discourse on religion and reinterpretation of the tradition. To establish his point, he undertakes a survey of the works of Hasan Hanafi, Muhammad Abid Jabiri, and Nasr abu Zayd. Tayob demonstrates that a critical discourse on religion is now in the picture in the Arab world. This discourse has not yet developed a clearly defined category of religion, but it has shown interest in the meaning and role of religion in reconstruction of modern society. According to Tayob, there are two dimensions of this critical discourse: "In the first place, the meaning of religious thought and religious texts are deconstructed in their original meaning and reference. Secondly, the meaning of such discourse in contemporary discourse is similarly analysed and deconstructed."<sup>70</sup>

By the way of conclusion, it is observed that apparently, the contemporary Muslim appropriations of *al-milal wa al-nihal* and religious studies are ambivalent. The ambivalence towards *al-milal wa al-nihal* stems from the fact that right from the beginning its disciplinary identity has not been firmly established but at the same time some works display exceptional methodological acumen. As hinted at in the third chapter above, the ambivalence towards religious studies stems from its cultural background. It is seen as an enterprise grounded in the modern scientific ethos as well as related to the cultural and religious history of Europe.

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 347.

<sup>70</sup>Tayob, "The Study of Religion and Social Crises: Arab-Islamic Discourse in Late Twentieth Century," 120.

Thus, it can be viewed that the internal heterogeneity of the two knowledge traditions in question is the source of ambivalent and variegated responses.

In the second place, the Muslim appropriations of both knowledge traditions are divergent owing to the socio-political differences of the contemporary Muslim world.<sup>71</sup> For instance, in Indonesia the *Pancasila* ideology of the state has given rise to a peculiar Indonesian theology of religions. The first pillar of this ideology pertains to an inclusively formulated belief in 'the One and Only Deity' and gives legal and accepted status to the major religions of the world. The Turkish transformation from the Ottoman Empire to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's (1881–1938) laicism project presents another example of how the political situation influences the approaches to the study of religions. Today a disciplinary tradition has emerged in the Turkish universities wherein various religions are studied in a non-confessional fashion. Similarly, it is well attested thesis that the defeat of Arab Armies by Israel in 1967 war created a social predicament which resulted in return to religion in the Arab societies. The fact which has received scant attention is that this social crisis has also caused the emergence of a critical discourse of Islam attempting to deconstruct the classical textual readings.<sup>72</sup> It is clear that today the Muslim appropriations of religious studies are not identical across the national boundaries.

Thirdly, there is also a tendency among certain contemporary Muslim scholars to take pride in substantiating the objectivity and historical nature of the study of religion by the classical Muslim scholars. Sometimes it is also claimed that the classical Muslim scholars were able to devise methods similar to those of contemporary religious studies. This approach however has limited constructive prospects, firstly, because such rhetoric standardizes certain modern notions such as 'eidetic vision' and 'objectivity', which potentially make them immune from careful scrutiny. Secondly, the approach forestalls the possibility of a genuine cross fertilization by drawing hasty parallels between the two distinct scholarly traditions.

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<sup>71</sup> Now, there is a growing awareness that ideally any discourse on Islam or Muslims should combine the aspect of Islam as a decontextualized global reality and the aspect of localized and contextualized cases of beliefs and practices. Lief Manger, ed., *Muslim Diversity: Local Islam in Global Contexts* (Surrey: Curzon, 1999), 2. In this connection, we have already acknowledged the limitations of our narrative in the foregoing pages. Suffice here a couple of examples.

<sup>72</sup> Tayob, "The Study of Religion and Social Crises: Arab-Islamic Discourse in Late Twentieth Century," 107-23.



Fourthly, the second-order Muslim perceptions of religious studies point to another fact that the non-western knowledge traditions sometimes tend to join forces with different strands of post-modern criticism in highlighting the limitations of the modernism project. However, it seems that at occasions the critics fail to see that post-modernism is equally detrimental to assumptions of their own knowledge tradition, which they intend to establish as an alternative. This observation specifically applies to the Islamization of knowledge discourse. That is why the Muslim scholars who critically appraise religious studies appear to be less successful so far in presenting credible alternative methodologies and research models which can bring relief to the challenges faced by the contemporary academy.

### **Part 3: Beyond Encounter**

[I]n an apparent paradox, the fundamental duality of self and other is only overcome when the subject splits and recognizes both *the other within and the self without*. (Melissa Frazier, 2007:5)

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## **Chapter 6:**

### **6. Reflexivity, Reciprocity, and Mutuality between the Two Knowledge Traditions**

In the first part (second and third chapters) above we observed that encounters with the perceived cultural or religious Others played the role of catalyst in emergence and subsequent development of the study of religion both in Muslim and the Western knowledge traditions. Again from the discussion in the second part (fourth and fifth chapters) it has become clear that both the knowledge traditions tend to gradually recognize each other's existence. A logical corollary of this recognition is that both of them are also becoming reflexive and, to a certain level, mutually enriching each other.

Muslim scholars show ambivalent attitude towards the contemporary discipline of religious studies. Some of them criticize its certain tenets while the others do not reject the whole enterprise outright and instead try to establish connections between the classical Muslim legacy of the study of religion and the contemporary religious studies. On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that gradually the Western scholars are becoming more appreciative and receptive to the fact that there indeed has been pioneering efforts in the medieval Muslim civilization to study religion descriptively.

Let us consider now, are there any signs and prospects of reflexivity, reciprocity and mutuality emerging as the result of encounters of the two knowledge traditions which have moved from the first- to the second-order level? Before moving ahead it seems appropriate to clarify, in what sense the concepts of reflexivity, reciprocity and mutuality are used here. Reflexivity here means that while studying religious tradition<sup>b</sup> (first-order level) or evaluating the scholarship of scholar<sup>b</sup> with a different cultural background (second-order level), the scholar<sup>a</sup> becomes alert to the fact that his or her own tradition<sup>a</sup> and personal standpoint is also subject to scrutiny by scholar<sup>b</sup>. Sometimes, the reflexivity lies in-between the lines but at occasions scholars directly refer to, or anticipate the response of the scholars belonging to the tradition that is being studied.

By reciprocity it is meant here that if scholar<sup>a</sup> adjusts a scholarly position as a result of the views expressed by scholar<sup>b</sup>, scholar<sup>b</sup> also adjusts his or her position in response, and vice-versa.<sup>1</sup> The reciprocal exchange needs not be positive or constructive by definition, nor is it necessary that exchange of responses be on one and the same issue. Mutuality of perception, in turn, has been explained as follows: two scholars know an object of knowledge, both of

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<sup>1</sup> For those interested in an "authoritative" definition of reciprocity, see Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, 36.

them know that the other knows the same object, and each of them also knows that the other knows what s/he knows.<sup>2</sup> In other words, mutuality between two interacting knowledge traditions is achieved when each of the two not only perceives the other but also becomes aware of being perceived by the other.

Now, the contemporary encounters between Muslim and western knowledge traditions have generated a budding second-order tradition of mutual perceptions and appropriations as elaborated above. Apparently, these encounters show some signs of reflexivity, reciprocity, and mutuality. Let us substantiate point made above using the following parameters: theory and method, categories, media of scholarship, and institutional frameworks.

## **6.1 Theory and Method**

With reference to the recent developments in religious studies, it has been discussed in detail in the second chapter how the push of globalization is bringing to the fore the issue of different cultural contexts of and perspective on religious studies. It has been noticed that a group of scholars, mostly with the Anglo-American background are more open towards the possibility of alternative theoretical models of religious studies. In this connection, the notion of theory pluralism propounded by Cabezón has been discussed. Cabezón's description gives a hint at how religious studies is showing signs of reflexivity, reciprocity, and even mutuality.

She maintains that religious studies emerged, at least in part, as a result of encounter with the religious Other. She delineates three stages of the European awareness of the religious Others. At stage I, the Others were taken as: "They are not like us". In this stage there was a reluctance even to accept that the Other could have religion. Religion as a term was almost exclusively reserved for Christianity. At stage II, the Others were as: "They are like us, but we are rational." Now the term religion becomes universal and applied across cultures. At the third stage, the Others are seen as: "They are like us, but...." now rationality too becomes

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<sup>2</sup> This is the most basic condition of mutuality. Otherwise, to determine the existence of mutuality between two agents is a much more complex problem. See, Josef Perner and Alan Garnham, "Conditions for Mutuality," *Journal of Semantics* 6, no. 1 (1988): 369-72.

ubiquitous.<sup>3</sup> Now the scholars of religious studies tend to think that they have theory, but the Others do not have. Cabezón aspires the next step be *theory parity* but has doubts if such a stage will ever come. This evolution of the attitude towards Other views by her is clear indication that religious studies is gradually becoming more reflexive, reciprocal with regard to the encounter with non-Western cultures and even bears some signs of willingness to move towards a mutually shared disciplinary space between scholars with different cultural backgrounds.

What is important is the fact that even those scholars who are generally persuaded by the notion of a universalized concept of religious studies are now more reflexive towards the scholarly traditions of different civilization. For instance, Michael Pye admits:

[I]n taking seriously the cultural diversity of various regions of the world, we are compelled to take account of divergent models of what counts as the field, when people engage in the study of religions. However, this does not mean that the study of religions cannot be and should not be a coherent undertaking in a worldwide perspective, allowing for the collaboration of scholars from within the various cultural regions.<sup>4</sup>

Over and above recognition of a possibility, Frank Whaling practically considers the question how can western scholars and scholars from other cultures authentically represent and transmit a mutually verifiable knowledge of the various religions of the world while at the same time recognizing that they are part of wider whole, namely humanity? For him the first step towards this direction is to allow other cultures and religions to free themselves from western stereotypes; the second step is to conceptualize the global unity lying behind the religious diversity. In former times the global unity was imposed by the western stereotypes; in the present context it must be inter-culturally conceptualized.<sup>5</sup>

Keeping this in mind, he undertakes a survey of contributions made by six non-western scholars to the scholarly study of religion and ventures to figure out the theoretical implications of their work. All of the selected scholars come from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds. He concludes that contrary to what the thesis of Edward Said might

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<sup>3</sup>Cabezón, "The Discipline and Its Other: The Dialectic of Alterity in the Study of Religion," 22-25.

<sup>4</sup>Pye, "Difference and Coherence in the Worldwide Study of Religion," 94.

<sup>5</sup>Whaling, "The Study of Religion in a Global Context," 230.

have implied, their work differs from historically-oriented scholarship on academic and cultural grounds rather than imperialist grounds.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, a recent survey of literature reveals that today the concerns of religious studies are shaped by global perspectives and scholars are trying to cope with the challenges of post-modernism by trying to be self-reflective.<sup>7</sup> An interesting normative proposal has been made by Arvind Sharma in this direction. He suggests that as the academic study of religion is a multitraditional, polymethodic discipline, there are two types of possibilities of reciprocal illumination: "that of one tradition shedding light on another and that of one method doing the same in relation to another."<sup>8</sup> His edited book appears as an outcome of the reciprocal illumination between different religious traditions.

More recently, a book has appeared which is the output of an international, interreligious workshop structured by members of the *Encounter of Religious Traditions Research Group*, based at the Faculty of Theology of the Free University of Amsterdam. The book contains papers, written by representatives of the major world religions. These papers were first presented at the workshop and then reviewed in the light of the discussion of them that took place during the workshop.<sup>9</sup>

The above mentioned developments show a general movement towards increased reflexivity, reciprocity, mutuality in the study of religion in today's globalized world. Speaking specifically about the Muslim and Western tradition, we have got a couple of examples to substantiate the point here. Patrice C. Brodeur's thesis on the Muslim study of religion has been discussed in detail in the fourth chapter above. His standpoint is obvious evidence that religious studies scholars are making the necessary move toward greater reciprocity and mutual understanding between the two knowledge traditions. He raises a

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Starling, "Religious Studies: A Bibliographic Essay," 205-06.

<sup>8</sup>Arvind Sharma, *Religious Studies and Comparative Methodology: The Case for Reciprocal Illumination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), ix.

<sup>9</sup>Jerald D. Gort, "Religions View Religions: General Introduction," in *Religions view religions : explorations in pursuit of understanding*, ed. HENRY JANSEN JERALD D. GORT, HENDRIK M. VROOM (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 5.

number of important theoretical questions: Can Western scholars assume that the scientific norms developed in the West are equally applicable to other religions and cultures, like Islamic Egypt? Is it not culpable of concealed intellectual imperialism to expect Muslims to use the Western scientific methods of analyzing religion? And then goes on to say:

All these questions point toward our core problem: the relationship between the Western scientific study of religions and the Islamic study of religions. Both traditions may seem to have developed in isolation from one another, at different periods of human history. Yet both now clearly interact with one another, in confrontation for most, in harmony for a few of their proponents, but certainly in creative tension on both sides.<sup>10</sup>

Some development is visible on institutional level. Mention has been made of a special conference of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) held in Marburg in 1988. In this conference a Working Group was constituted to reflect on the problems involved in the study of religion in the context of Muslim culture. The Working Group sketched out some suggestions to extend outreach of the IAHR to the Muslim countries. For instance, it was suggested that the study of religions not mentioned in Qur'an should be given priority so that the Qur'anic view of the other religions may not hinder the progress of analytical study of religion; and that Islam should not be made the object of critical analysis to avert the impression of the problematic oriental studies.<sup>11</sup> The constitution of Working Group, as well as its suggestions, point out reflexivity on the part of religious studies.

On the other hand, Muslim scholars, too, appear to be quite reflexive, reciprocating to the Western approaches as well as seeking possibilities of creative solutions and participation in mutually shared disciplinary space. For instance, Brodeur has found out that a creative symbiosis is taking place between the two knowledge traditions in the study of religion in contemporary Egypt. To quote him:

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<sup>10</sup>Brodeur, "From an Islamic Heresiography to an Islamic History of Religions: Modern Arab Muslim Literature on 'Religious Others' with Special Reference to Three Egyptian Authors", 282-83.

<sup>11</sup>Michael Pye, ed., *Marburg Revisited: Institutions and Strategies in the Study of Religion* (Marburg: diagonal-Verlag, 1989), 153-56.



This integration of both an inherited Islamic history of religions and the growing influence of a powerful Western study of religion among a few Egyptian Muslim intellectuals during the mid-twentieth century is reminder that creation (real or imagined) of simultaneously geographical and chronological spaces allows for creative re/definition to take place, leading eventually to new or redefined genres which in turn lead to new or renewed academic fields. The interrelationship between definition genre, and academic discipline is well exemplified by our three authors' respective understanding of 'comparative religion'.<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly, the West is perceived as the Other in such a discursive tradition, but at the same time, some of its ideals and standards are cherished consciously or unconsciously. This is why the situation can be rightly called as a possibility of creative mutuality in understanding each other.

In this connection, a model of Muslim intellectuals engagement with the West and modernity has been presented by Basit Bilal Koshul in a seminal paper titled "Studying the Western Other, Understanding the Islamic Self: A Qur'anically Reasoned Perspective". The paper was presented at the *Studying the "Other", Understanding the "Self": Scripture, Reason, and the Contemporary Islam-West Encounter* conference, held at Hartford Seminary, on April 2, 2005. Taking the clue from Muhammad Iqbal's interpretation of the mythic Fall which gave it a positive connotation as man's rise from primitive stage of instinctive appetite to the conscious possession of a free self, capable of doubt and disobedience, Koshul asserts that the Enlightenment's break with tradition is quite similar to the original Fall from Eden. Over against the authority, Enlightenment moved towards self-assertion and self-consciousness analogously to the first Fall, albeit, this time at a more deeper level. Thus ambivalently conceptualizing Enlightenment, and for that matter modernity in general, Koshul propounds a twofold model for a possibly constructive and creative Muslim encounters with the West and modernity. Taking the circumambulation around Ka'aba as a metaphor, he names the two elements of his model as 'circling the square', and 'squaring the circle'. In view of the importance of his model, it is quoted below verbatim:

[T]he circling of square requires a rejection of the uncritical affirmation of tradition (or a particular school within tradition) just as squaring of the circle requires a rejection of the blind negation of tradition by zealots and the liberals....

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<sup>12</sup>Brodeur, "From an Islamic Heresiography to an Islamic History of Religions: Modern Arab Muslim Literature on 'Religious Others' with Special Reference to Three Egyptian Authors", 260.

Islam can gain valuable insights by critically but constructively engaging with the modern West. This engagement has two aspects and both aspects are characterized by simultaneous affirmation and criticism. The affirmation is done “within the limits of reason alone” while criticism is undertaken from the perspective of the Qur’anic evidence.

*Squaring the Circle:* Islam plays the role of a prophetic dissenting witness from within the modern worlds- which means:

1. a reasoned/rational critique of the Enlightenment rejection of wisdom, illumination and Divine and
2. a reasoned/rational affirmation of the Islamic ideals of *iman*, *islam*, and *ihsan*.

*Circling the Square:* Islam plays the role of a prophetic affirming witness from outside the modern world- which means:

1. the Qur’anic affirmation of the Enlightenment ideals of human dignity, human equality and the value of the profane/material
2. the Qur’anic critique of Islamic tradition for its failure to fully express key Islamic ideals in institutional form.”<sup>13</sup>

The model proposed by Koshul is certainly reflexive with regard to the Muslim tradition. It is simultaneously critical and affirmative with regard to the West and modernity. In sum, it can be considered as embodiment of the interpretive title phrase of the present dissertation: *the Other within and the Self without*. Most importantly, this model can provide a good explanation for the ambivalent attitudes of Muslim scholars towards religious studies as have been uncovered in the fifth chapter in the foregoing pages. Once the Muslim study of religion acquired a certain level of reflexivity, self-criticism, and openness for engagement, prospects exist for creative new possibilities not only for the Muslim scholars but also for the study of religion as a worldwide pursuit in general.

The interdependence of the self and the other thus conceived is closer to the yin and yang polarities rather than the Hegelian dialectics. In Hegelian dialectics the thesis and anti-thesis are contradictory to each other. To arrive at a synthesis the anti-thesis must overcome

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<sup>13</sup>Koshul, "Studying the Western Other, Understanding the Islamic Self: A Qur'anically Reasoned Perspective," 159.

the thesis.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, the yin and yang are complimentary to each other in a sense that one of the apparently opposing elements in yin-yang polarity cannot exist without the other. Through their interaction in a harmonious way yin and yang opposites cause creation of new phenomena and forces to develop. This creative movement envisioned in yin-yang dialectics is circular as opposed to the linear development in the Hegelian dialects.<sup>15</sup>

Generally, it seems that in the face of steady push of globalization and growing awareness of the plurality of scholarly traditions, religious studies is bound to become more dialogical and perspectival in nature.

## 6.2 Categories

The issue of appropriate cross-cultural categories has been of utmost importance for the enterprise of the study of religion. What is crucial about categories is that they must not distort the historical reality of the religion or culture under discussion but at the same time they need to convey the concept across the cultures. For instance, *'ibādah* is an Islamic category which will not be meaningful out of the context of Islamic culture. At the face of it, the alternative seems already at hand: *'ibādah* can be replaced with 'ritual'. However, ritual might be a good starting point to understand the Islamic concept of *'ibādah*, but if the student stops at 'ritual' her or his understanding will remain quite superficial. Understandably, most of the categories utilized in religious studies have been formulated by Western scholars. In fact, one of the important aspects of religious studies in cross-cultural perspective is the issue of appropriate categories. Religious studies is gradually becoming informed of the indigenous categories. It is not simply coincidence that today, Hindu terms such as Vedanta, dharma, Maya, sutra, mantra, yoga, avatar, and karma are already incorporated in common English dictionaries, but not *hadīth* (prophetic tradition), *tawhīd* (unity of God), and *zakāt* (prescribed annual charity), for instance. This comparison in passing shows the lack of serious

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<sup>14</sup> For a critique of the Hegelian dialectics see, Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, 312-35. Originally, this chapter was published as a journal article in *Mind* 49(1940): 451-86.

<sup>15</sup> Kyong-Dong Kim, "Reflections upon the Dilemmas of Civilization: The Wisdom of Yin and Yang," in *East meets West: Civilizational Encounters and the spirit of Capitalism in East Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 15-17.

engagement between Muslim and Western traditions in the study of religion in the area of mutually understandable categories.

There are, however, some initial developments in this regard, on both the sides. The notion of comparison is an apt example of mutuality here. The disciplinary title *muqāranat al-adyān* (comparative religion) is quite common in the Muslim academic and popular circles. It is a simple translation of the English term. Apparently, its popularity owes, at least in part, to the influence of religious studies. For, before coming into contact with religious studies, this term never appeared in the indigenously produced scholarly works. However, it may be noted that the term ‘comparative’ is not understood exactly in the sense in which it is used by the Western scholars. In the Muslim societies ‘comparison’ is often understood in normative terms as a method to judge the relative superiority of religions. It is important to note that this apparently insignificant misperception of a single term has far reaching effects in creating misunderstanding about religious studies in the Muslim societies.

Another interesting case is that of ‘religion’. Before coming into contact with religious studies, Muslims rarely used the Arabic term *dīn* to refer to universal phenomenon called today “religion”. However, now it is quite commonplace to consider ‘religion’ and *dīn* interchangeable and also to use the plural form *adyān*. However, the general replacement of *al-milal wa al-niḥal* appellation with terms like *muqāranat al-adyān* and *tārikh al-adyān* in the present day Muslim scholarship indicates acceptance of religion as a cross-cultural category.

What is even more interesting, most recently, Muslim and Western traditions in the study of religion join hands in critiquing the category “religion”. The views of Talal Asad in this connection have already been discussed in the fifth chapter above. A parallel can be drawn between critique of Asad and Timothy Fitzgerald.<sup>16</sup> Fitzgerald maintains that: “The construction of ‘religion’ and ‘religions’ as global, cross-cultural objects of study has been part of a wider historical process of western imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism.”<sup>16</sup> This is how both of them consider ‘religion’ to be a problematic category for understanding non-Western cultures.

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<sup>16</sup>Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, 8.

It is noted that, at occasions reflexivity and reciprocity develop into mutuality. An obvious example is the use of term ‘Muhammadanism’ by nineteenth century orientalist scholars. Later on, when these scholars came into close contact with Islam and the Muslim scholarship they abandoned the use of this inappropriate term in favour of the indigenous term ‘Islam’.

### **6.3 Media of Scholarship**

An important avenue of mutuality between the two knowledge traditions is the media of scholarship. The use of modern technologies like printing press, audio and video recording devices, television, radio, and multimedia projectors are obvious cases in point. What is more important, however, are media like books, research journals, e-journals, electronic databases, internationally standardized library cataloguing protocols and manuals of style, transliteration schemes, academic conferences, tradition of research and dissertation writing and so on.

Certainly most of these technologies, techniques, and media were unimaginable in the pre-modern Islamic societies. Therefore, these media play a dual role in facilitating engagement between the two knowledge traditions in question. Firstly, like most of the other non-Western societies, Muslims are at the receiving end and they simply adopt almost uncritically the protocols, standards, and norms established by the Western academia for the use of these media. Secondly, these very media facilitate the mutual encounters contacts between the two knowledge traditions. As a result, some Muslim scholars use the same media and make their views known. This is how a shared space for mutual academic exchange develops.

A quite important mutually shared space between the two knowledge traditions has emerged though cross-referencing in the academic texts. Today, hardly any significant book in Muslim societies, including books on religions, appear without citing sources from the Western academic world. Conversely, no work on Islam by Western scholars will be rated as serious scholarship if it does not cite the original texts from Muslim scholarly tradition. In this way, the interaction between the two knowledge traditions is growing without being noticed very much.

Recently, we also have some examples of Muslim and Western religious studies scholars co-authoring book volumes. For instance, Richard C. Martin’s book *Approaches to*

*Islam in Religious Studies*<sup>17</sup> includes critical book chapters by Muslim authors. Similarly, *New Approaches to the study of Religion*,<sup>18</sup> incorporates several chapters by Muslim authors. Another worth mentioning case of collaboration is conferences of the International Associations for History of Religion held in the Muslim countries, for instance Turkey and Indonesia.<sup>19</sup>

#### 6.4 Institutional frameworks

Apart from the contemporary media of scholarship, institutional frameworks and collaborations are yet another vista of engagement between the two knowledge traditions. It has been discussed in the foregoing pages how the modern university system partially replaced the traditional educational institutions. Since the modern university is a global institution, different universities from the Muslim societies and European and American countries have developed a strong tradition of academic exchange. Every year thousands of students from the Muslim countries travel to Western countries for education. Some of these students study social science, and occasionally philosophy and religious studies. These students serve as connecting bridges between the two knowledge traditions.

Let us substantiate this point with a few examples. Anis Ahmad from Pakistan got doctorate from the Temple University in History of Religions. He subsequently proved to be the key figure behind establishment of the departments of comparative religion in International Islamic University in Islamabad and International Islamic University Malaysia. The example of Mukti Ali has already been mentioned above who was a student of Wilfred Cantwell Smith and then established the discipline of comparative religion in Indonesia. The institutional collaboration between Turkish and European universities goes back to the Ottoman era, which increased after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's secular policy. In the recent history of Pakistan, the Higher Education Commission of the country has launched a massive

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<sup>17</sup>Richard C. Martin, *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985).

<sup>18</sup>Armin W. Geertz, Peter Antes, Randi R. Warne, ed., *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*, 2 vols., vol. 1: Regional, Critical, and Historical Approaches, Religion and Reason (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter Inc, 2004).

<sup>19</sup>Edith Franke Michael Pye, Alef Theria Wasim, and Abdurrahman Ma'sud, ed., *Religious Harmony: Problems, Practices, and Education*, Religion and Reason (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006).

international mobility program for thousands of research students. Such institutional arrangement is envisaged to create new spaces for mutual intellectual engagements, not the least for the discipline of religious studies.

By the way of conclusion to this chapter, it can be maintained that the encounter between Muslim and Western Knowledge traditions in the study of religion is conducive to reflexivity, reciprocity, and mutuality on both sides up to some degree. However, this development is happening not so much because of conscious deliberations but due to the self imposing media of scholarship and institutional arrangements.

## **Chapter 7:**

### **7. Conclusion**



In order to draw final conclusion(s) it seems appropriate to give summary of the main findings of the study with regard to questions elaborated in the introduction. In the first part of this dissertation, it has been discussed how and under what circumstances the study of religions in their plurality was initiated in the Western and Muslim cultural history. It has been shown that both internal and external factors were instrumental in emergence and development of the study of religion in the two cultures in question.

The emergence of the contemporary Western religious studies is seen as an outcome of the broader conditions of modernity and the engagement of Western thinkers with religious otherness. It has been discussed that development of religious studies is interpreted in two different ways. Firstly, theorists like Samuel Preus and Donald Wiebe maintain that the new approach to the study of religion was a break away from the previous religio-theological paradigm and that its culmination owes to the Enlightenment critique of religion. According to this view, the discipline of religious studies emerged as an outcome of rationalization and secularization which established a differentiation between religion and the study of religion.

Secondly, scholars like Hans G. Kippenberg maintain that about three centuries long history of philosophy of religions reveals something more complex. The leading theorists of religion conceive the relationship between modernity and religion differently. They do not underestimate the role of religion in modernity. Thus, without outright rejection of the first understanding, the present study agrees with the second interpretation according to which religious studies underscored an ambivalent relationship between scientific progress and the pervasiveness of religion, accepting the existential importance of religion but rejecting its claim to ultimate truth. Constructing this ambivalence in the Meadean framework, it is hypothesized that although the historical religions did not constitute the disciplinary “I” of religious studies, they did let it acquire the “Me” of its disciplinary self.

Concerning the external factors, that is to say the encounter with the Other, it is noted that the genesis of nineteenth century *Religionswissenschaft* coincided with the major developments of colonization. If the chronology of the inception of the discipline set out by Eric J. Sharpe be taken literally – that is between 1859 and 1869<sup>1</sup> – then the development took place just two years after the

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<sup>1</sup>Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 27.

so called Mutiny of 1857 which resulted in the formal colonisation of India. It is not to say that religious studies has been directly connected to colonization. What is obvious, however, is the fact that due to the expansion of Europe, new religious worlds came into the purview of European consciousness leading to the recognition of religious plurality which is a bedrock presupposition of the enterprise of academic study of religion.

It is also noted that after the Second World War, especially since the two last decades of the twentieth century, the phenomenon of globalization has forced the theorist of the discipline to take into account different contexts of and perspectives on the study of religion seriously. One of such instances is the study of religion in the context of Muslim culture, which was addressed in the special conference of the International Association for the History of Religions held in Marburg in 1988.

Turning towards the case of the Muslim tradition, it has been maintained that not all what the Muslim scholars have written about religions can be considered as the “study of religion.” Right from the early centuries of the Muslim civilization onwards, writing on different religions appeared under a variety of genres. These genres include *al-munāẓrāt* (polemics), *al-rasāʾil* (letters), *al-ruddūd* (refutations), *al-maqālāt* (treatises), *al-fīraq* (sects), and *al-milal wa al-niḥal* (religious denominations and sects). Keeping in view the content and approach of the writers, a typology of these works is proposed as follows: a) polemics centred on familiar theological disputes, b) works written from a confessional standpoint but introducing methodological novelties or recording important historical data on religions, and c) systematic and descriptive studies on religions with no declared apologetic motives. It is maintained that only the third type of works can be reasonably considered as the pioneering efforts in the worldwide history of religious studies. Sometimes, as in this dissertation, the term *al-milal wa al-niḥal* is used to denote such works.

It has been found that the emergence and development of *al-milal wa al-niḥal* tradition was an outcome of the Qurʾānic worldview and a result of the encounters with other religious traditions which the Muslim civilization went through in its history. Islam appeared in a religiously plural world and presented itself over against the surrounding religious convictions. Thus, the religious identity of the new faith community developed in relation to the existing alternatives. Although Islam vehemently denounced the pagan elements of the pre-Islamic Arabia, it adapted a range of existing rituals and religious symbols considering them survivals of the pristine Abrahamic religion. As regard the established traditions of Christianity and Judaism, the Qurʾān affirms the divine origin of their scriptures but

proclaims that they have been corrupted through the course of history. In this context, it is argued that the Qur'ānic view of religions combines the elements of negation and affirmation with regard to other religions, especially Christianity and Judaism. The resultant ambivalence towards other religions generates and sustains the interest in different religions and at the same time makes their objectification possible. Thus, certain Muslim scholars such as al-Bīrūnī (362/973–443/1048) and al-Shahrastānī (479/1086–553/1153) found an epistemological framework through which they could approach the plurality of religions rationally and present it descriptively. It has been explicated how these scholars employed the hermeneutical and historiographical expertise which had already been developed in the Islamic learned traditions related to interpretation of the Qur'an and authentication of the prophetic traditions.

Theoretically, *al-milal wa al-niḥal* legacy has been analysed with reference to a particular dialectics of self and Other. It is propounded that owing to the belief in the universality of Prophet-hood, other religious traditions were approached as “islams” of various communities, that is, the religious self was projected without. Conversely, the roots of different Muslim sects and heresies were traced in the other religious traditions, that is, the Other was seen within. Thus, the study of Muslim sects and other religious traditions made a single disciplinary tradition.

In the second part, Western perceptions of the Muslim study of religions are classified into three broader types, which can also be seen as three developmental stages. In the first stage, these perceptions relate to the editing of manuscripts on the subject of religions. The forms of these perceptions have been introductions, prefaces, and forewords to the edited manuscripts as well as marginal notes. We observed that on occasions these editors and translators appear to be fascinated by the objectivity and scholarly vigor of the mediaeval Muslim writers but tend to see these features as exceptional cases.

The next phase witnessed detailed studies of individual Muslim writers on other religions. For instance, David Thomas has studied al-Warrāq's (9<sup>th</sup> century) work on Christianity, and Wassilios Klein has written about al-Bīrūnī and religions in an intercultural perspective. Displaying a clear sign of development, these studies see the work under discussion in comparison with other works on religions contributed by the Muslim scholars from the same period. Now, these studies also reflect on the question whether the works of

the Muslim authors concerned can or should be considered as a part of the history of religious studies.

In the third and more recent stage, a variety of systematic and interpretive studies have appeared that venture to make an overall assessment of the Muslim study of religions. It is noticed that in general the Anglo-American scholars show comparatively greater willingness to accept the alternative scholarly models for the study of religions as credible, while the continental European scholars tend to cherish the spirit of scientific inquiry reminiscent of the foundations of disciplinary landscape that emerged during and after the Enlightenment. This difference of opinion depends on the understanding of the discipline of religious studies itself.

Interpreting the developmental stages as outlined above, it is maintained that after the mid-twentieth century, the pressing phenomenon of globalization ruled out the isolated and privileged pockets of knowledge, making scholarly inquiries more interactive and thereby challenging the conventional concepts of discipline and scholarship. Thus, homogenised and universalized identity of the enterprise of religious studies was confronted with particular local knowledge traditions. As a result, the importance of different contexts of and perspectives on religious studies is gradually being recognized. The development can be seen as a movement from recognition of the plurality of religions to that of the plurality of scholarly traditions in the study of religion.

On the other side, contemporary Muslim approaches and responses to religious studies, too, are divided into three categories. The first approach can be seen as the ‘(re)invention of tradition’, that is to say, selective elements of the past *al-milal wa al-niḥal* scholarship are grafted over contemporary approaches and methodologies to construct the “Muslim religious studies”. Secondly, there are a few Muslim intellectuals who have critiqued religious studies with regard to its underlying assumptions, methodologies, and cultural baggage. It is noted that although this group of scholars criticises religious studies from quite different theoretical perspectives, they share one common concern that it is deeply embedded in secular worldview. It has been observed that these scholars appear to be critical not in order to demolish religious studies but to meaningfully participate in this discursive field. The third response of the Muslim intellectuals to religious studies is receptive and adoptive. Thus, a handful of Muslim scholars discuss the situation and prospects of this discipline in Muslim countries apparently taking it uncritically.

Generally, it is viewed that in all instances of the second-order Muslim reflections on the study of religion, the “West” stands for the Other, which sometimes proves to be catalyst in creative developments, while the instances of excessive othering lead to regression of the creative intellectual activity.

In the third and last part of the study, which comprises only one chapter, it has been noted that the contemporary encounters between Muslim and Western knowledge traditions have been instrumental in developing some instances of reflexivity, reciprocity, and mutuality with regard to the discipline of religious studies. Noticeable arenas of reflexivity, reciprocity, and mutuality include - in the order of magnitude of the development- the theory and method debate, media of scholarship, institutional contexts, and formulation of categories. Specifically, Jacques Waardenburg’s survey of the Muslim perceptions appears to be informed of and reflexive with regard to the Muslim criticism of Western scholarship. Similarly, Brodeur’s awareness and interpretation of the Muslim study of religions has been conducive to his reflection on the possibility of a ‘pluralistic history of religions’, which can be taken as a move toward mutuality. Generally, it is noted that scholars like Basit Bilal Koshul, Arvind Sharma, and Brodeur are trying to develop models of mutually shared intellectual spaces which can be seen as embodiment of the ideal: *The Other within and the Self Without*.

On the bases of observations and findings of the study as describe above, the following general conclusions can be drawn:

1. Analogously to the identity of social agents, the disciplinary identity of religious studies emerges over against the perceived Other. However, the sheer necessity of other for acquisition of self identity generates ambivalence towards the Other. Thus, the disciplinary self and its Other coexist and depend on each other to in some way like yin and yang. Through their continuous interaction yin and yang polarities cause the creation of new phenomena and structures to develop.<sup>2</sup> The dialectics of self and Other, which underscores ambivalence towards the Other applies when the encounter between different knowledge traditions develops into the second-order mutual perceptions. The creative movement envisioned in such dialectics of self and Other is

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<sup>2</sup>Kim, "Reflections upon the Dilemmas of Civilization: The Wisdom of Yin and Yang," 15-17.

circular as opposed to the linear development in the Hegelian dialectics.<sup>3</sup>

2. However, a complication involved in the encounter of religious studies with different autochthonic knowledge traditions is that the power relationship makes the former ‘*the*’, not ‘*a*’ religious studies. Referring to the concept of hermeneutical circle, the Muslim tradition of study of religion finds itself in part-to-part as well as part-to-whole reciprocity when encountered with religious studies.
3. Similar dialects of self and Other extends to the second-order level mutual perceptions as has been found in the case of encounter between Muslim and the Western knowledge traditions.
4. Some instances of *al-milal wa al-niḥal* tradition, like the work of al-Shahrastānī and al-Bīrūnī, point to the fact that the humanly possible “objectivity” in the study of religion can be achieved beyond the Cartesian model of subject-object dichotomy. A similar conclusion has been drawn by Pye who has discovered that scientific, objective and critical study of religion already existed in Japan before coming into contact with European scholarship.<sup>4</sup> In the case of *al-milal wa al-niḥal*, objectivity was achieved through a particular historiographical expertise which developed through a distinction between the content of historical narrative and its historicity.
5. The above observation signifies that it does not seem to be good approach to discard such studies as non-scientific for their being different from the patterns of *Religionswissenschaft* which developed in the nineteenth Europe and later developed into what is called today religious studies in most of the Western countries. Taking the non-Western scholarly traditions into account can enormously enrich the worldwide enterprise of study of religion and can have potential of bringing fresh insights into the theory and method debate and potentially yield creative solutions for the dilemmas which haunt the field today like the insider-outsider dichotomy, the relationship between theology and religious studies, the issue of formulation of cross-cultural categories, and the nature of interplay of the history of religion and the history of study of religion.

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<sup>3</sup> For a critique of the Hegelian dialectics see, “What is Dialectic?” in Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, 312-35. Originally, this chapter was published as a journal article in *Mind* 49(1940): 451-86.

<sup>4</sup> Pye, “Westernism Unmasked,” 224.

6. Apparently, the recognition of plurality of academic and cultural perspectives, or what has been called as theory pluralism, seems inevitable. Religious studies needs to be a cross-cultural endeavour, which neither succumbs to sheer relativism nor fails to endorse the contingencies afforded by various contexts of the subject matters and different perspectives of the scholars studying them. Substantial development in this direction is likely to change the fundamental coordinates of the issues like insider's-outsider's dichotomy, relationship between theology and religious studies, and interplay of the religious history and the history of religious studies. Nonetheless, the pivotal question remains to be answered: how to recognize the plurality of cultural perspectives in the study of religion without regressing to a banal confessionalization of the academy?

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